A Postcard and a Knife

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A Postcard and a Knife

by Canis_cosmos

Summary

Canon divergence S03 E05.

Pushed from his train and relying on a hallucinated stag to lead him to Florence, Will is drawn up short when he reaches a junction and his guide disappears.

The path he chooses leads him to the right place, but entirely the wrong time.

...Or: Will needs pre-med Hannibal's help, and has to avoid becoming Il Monstro's latest art project without revealing the truth of their relationship.

- - -
Will's POV
- - -

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: A Postcard and a Knife by Nemo_04

Chapter 1

The ravenstag begins to fade as the first grades of light spill into the sky. Pre-dawn light gathers, vanguard of the incumbent sun, and shines through the glossy black flanks, revealing shades of grey in the coarse gravel under the train tracks. The stag's steady pace never falters; it merely dwindles from perception.

All night it had led Will along Europe's antiquated railway system, committing without hesitation whenever the tracks diverged. This time, when the track splits, there's no feathered stag to blindly stumble after, and he stands at the juncture with his hands on his knees, tongue dry and thick in his mouth, options reduced to two: left, or right.

Will thinks, and not for the first time, that sometimes two options are worse than none.

Hidden in the thick broadleaf foliage around him, birds he can't see fill the air with trills and whistles, repeating calls and snatches of melody. It should be comforting, but it grates against the pressure behind his eyes. One half of his body is in considerable pain – the other half only distantly so. His feet and ankles ache from the unstable terrain offered by the coarse gravel, but it's easier than fighting through brambles and dense weeds at the edge of the tracks.

He had travelled to Lithuania to learn about Hannibal Lecter, to move towards building a more complete profile; to understand the man behind the myth he had created of himself. What had he found? The dripping ruins of a castle, pain laced masonry, two more captives in the tangled web of the monster he hunted. An origin story that only reinforced the legend.

He tilts his head back and looks at the nacre sky through the dark leaves above. Faith has never held much appeal. He has tried, goddammit he has fucking *tried* to be a good man. Not for some pearly white gates and an all-access pass to cloud city, but because… it's what you do, you strive for betterment. Expecting a reward for giving a shit has never been part of the bargain, and smacks of privilege.

Enter: Hannibal, stage left. If all the world's a stage, Hannibal's the only one who still remembers. The other actors all got lost in their roles, believed the lines they were handed. Hannibal goes off-script, works behind the scenes, subverts the plot, restructures the narrative.

What's Will meant to do when the lights go up for Act 2, his script worth less than a blank page?

He seems to have two options moving ahead. He can try to understand Hannibal, or he can kill him before any more innocent people bleed out on the floor. He looks at the right fork in the path. Will killing Hannibal remove his influence? Garret Jacob Hobbs had stayed with

Will for months after he filled his body with lead. Exposure to Hannibal might have already passed the critical stage.

The left track now falls under his scrutiny. Would untangling Hannibal grant him the insight to identify and remove his influence? Peel back the creepers of his manipulations? Or would it only give them more fertile soil to bed into?

He'll never know if he doesn't try, and it wouldn't be possible to reconsider after murdering him, whereas, killing him will remain an option right up until the minute he chooses to do it.

There is a sweetness to that thought. Alright. Understanding it is then.

For now.

His legs select the left track, and he lets them carry him along. They don't walk with the same assurance as the stag, but they have him moving again, and that has to be better than standing at the impasse of indecision.

Short of breath from pain and exertion, Will's first sight of Florence steals what little air remains in his lungs. Emerging from the treeline and taking a moment to rest, he marvels at the cityscape. The towers and the great swell of the Duomo's cupola manage to stir some latent awe through the murk of his exhaustion and the heavy relief of his destination's proximity.

A few more hours of walking, and judging by the sun, he enters the old city a little before noon, grateful for the solid walls of shade the buildings cast. It's hot, but he wears his coat to hide the sweat rings and dark spots of blood that have bled through his shirt from the grazes beneath.

Florence is *old*. Older than he can really fathom. The Duomo had begun construction in the 13thcentury, and the city had stood for over a millennium before that. He shuffles through its streets, senses awash with the architecture and clatter of urban life in an unfamiliar tongue. Ambulances Doppler past with a different siren, radios play music from another era, school children loose on their lunch-break jostle passed him with unintelligible chatter and laughter.

With so much to look at, avoiding the gazes of the local populace is easy enough, and a necessity considering his rumpled and battered appearance. Consequently, it only slowly dawns on him that the city is not only old, but strangely *old-fashioned.* The cars, the poster-board adverts, the complete lack of digital technology force him to finally look at the people around him.

He always heard Italians prized fashion, and while he has to admit the inhabitants are well turned out, the high waistbands, the hairstyles, even the sunglasses, all look out of date. The occupants of the city all look as though they've stepped out of a perfectly preserved 80s magazine.

Falling from the train must have done more damage than he realised. Encephalitis taught him how malleable perception could be, having hallucinated wendigos and dead serial killers, he can certainly chalk exaggerated fashion dissonance up to a cranial injury. It is certainly more likely than the alternatives; *i) Florence observes a city-wide '80s festival, ii) he has travelled through time...*

He passes the Piazza della Libertà, heading generally south, before getting lost in a tight maze of paved streets that eventually spit him out at the Arno River; a soothing, slow-moving ribbon, reflecting bright dots of sunlight. There would be no wading out into this stream, but he leans on the wall and finds calm in the flow of water.

Colourful buildings line the banks, arched windows peering past wooden shutters thrown wide. A statue looms on one side of him, gracing one corner of the bridge, stone robe billowing loose around him and a thick sheath of wheat under one arm. His female counterpart caps the opposite wall, looking in their direction, a basket under one arm.

Will shivers under her empty scrutiny, goosebumps growing in the warm sun. He is sweaty, dusty, bloody, tired, hungry, and unsettled. There is only one place he has to go, one thing he has to do.

The postcard from the Uffizi gallery remains in his possession, the piece of card and a knife were the only items on his person when pushed from the train. *Probably says something about you.* He hears Abigail's voice, but doesn't manifest her. Maybe if he finishes this – kills Hannibal and survives – he will allow himself to see her again. For now, the indulgence would only weaken him.

Assuming Will can kill Hannibal, can even *find* him.

Speculating on whether the strange temporal distortion in his perception will extend to the good doctor, he imagines the usual three-piece suits replaced with a shiny bomber jacket. Using the genuine smile the image conjures, he turns it on a passing man and garbles his rudimentary Italian, "Dov'è la Galleria degli Uffizi?"

"Gli Uffizi?" The man responds, peering curiously up and down the ragged picture Will makes, while he in turn wonders if the man's awful moustache is real or imagined.

"Si."

"Americano, yes?"

Will's smile becomes forced. "Si, Americano."

"I can tell," the man smirks, arching an eyebrow. "The galleria is near." He points along the bank of the river, "Keep on this road, eh? Passed the ponte, that is the Ponte Veccio there, yes?" He gestures with the flat of his hand, slicing through the air. "You keep walking, before the next ponte, you will see it. Big columns, piazzale. Cinque minuti."

"Grazie."

“Prego, prego.”

Five minutes later, Will limps between long tan columns, through a cool courtyard, and into the marbled halls of the Uffizi Gallery. Following floor plans and getting lost twice, he finally reaches the chamber with Botticelli’s *Primavera*.

A great empty void opens in his chest as he scans the room and sees no Hannibal. He boards over it by cursing under his breath. He really has no other ideas. He will have to sit in the room every day until closing, as he had in Palermo.

Some other tourists skirt the walls, ogling the paintings with the glazed look of the over-stimulated, and a lone art student sits on a low bench before the Primavera, diligently absorbed in his task.

A prickling sensation precedes the sliding panic, and Will grips the doorframe fiercely, until a large English couple pointedly cough for him to move out of the way.

The ridiculous notion doesn’t even fit… the slender young man has a fragility about him that Hannibal Lecter would never be able to fabricate, much less genuinely exude. Yet the erect posture, neat hair and trim suit certainly fit the profile.

Will shuffles around the side of the bench, unable to tear his eyes away as inimitable cheekbones rotate into view. He notices subtle variations: a finer jaw, smoother skin, some softer curves of lingering youth, a plumper pout of his lips… and then the eyes snap up to meet his. Dark and hostile before shifting in surprise and curiosity, and then that mask of control slides up, less fluid than usual, but unmistakably Hannibal.

The bench catches Will as he crumples gracelessly onto it, mouth artlessly slack.

“What’s happening?”

A few possibilities present themselves in response. One: this is all in his head. Two: he really is sitting next to Hannibal, but somehow picturing him twenty odd years younger. Three: he has jumped back in time and is genuinely sitting next to a younger Hannibal. Younger, but no less a serial killer, if Inspector Pazzi was correct.

Will swallows the lump of confusion in his throat, and waits to see if Hannibal has an answer. The ambiguous hope he holds onto withers as the seconds tick by without any sign of recognition on the young man’s face.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Hannibal blinks eventually. “English is not my first language, and I’m not sure if that is a genuine question, or a colloquial greeting.”

His accent is almost exactly the same, a little thicker, pitch a little lighter.

Will turns his face away and buries it in his hands.

A moment passes, and then the sketchbook shuts with a quiet clap of paper, and Will feels the attention focus exclusively on him. It seems, even at this point in his life, Hannibal is irresistibly drawn to distress.

“You appear in need of some medical attention.” The young man notes, voice discretely low in the public space.

Will chuckles into his coat sleeves, “Yeah, I don’t… I haven’t…” He sighs, shoulders slumping further into a protective posture as he considers how fundamentally screwed he is. He has a knife and a postcard in his pocket. No wallet, no passport, no phone, not even a goddamn watch. If he discovers he’s crazy he can’t just retreat back to America with his tail tucked between his legs. If he’s sane and he really is in… whatever fucking decade this is…

He lifts his head from the reassuring darkness of his palms, and meets the cool assessing gaze of the young man beside him. “This is going to sound strange,” he rasps, “but I don’t suppose you’d confirm what year it is for me? Would you?”

The cant to Hannibal’s head is achingly familiar, eerie with the uncanny features. “What year do you think it is?”

Will laughs. A typical Hannibal answer. Has he already started studying psychiatry, or was he just born this fucking annoying? “I’d rather not influence your answer.”

The scrutiny goes on for a long time. “It is 1989,” the answer eventually comes.

“Oh,” Will nods, eyes widening as he glances off around the room, “good.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckety fuck fuck.

So. One explanation collapses, and he’s down to two: this is either a complete fabrication of his mind with surround-sound visual *and* auditory hallucinations, or he has travelled back through time. The idea is so beyond ridiculous that he can’t even find it funny.

Hannibal’s voice intrudes into his blank despair. “If you don’t mind my saying, some of those wounds need disinfecting, and you look as though you may have a mild concussion. I’m... ‘pre-med’, I believe you say? Perhaps you would permit me to check your responses?”

A small whimper escapes Will’s throat, equal parts terror at the prospect of Hannibal’s ‘care’, and desperation for something familiar to cling to in this fresh hell. “That… that might be good. Thanks.” The words fall from his mouth like shell casings as he fires into the face of logic. But where would logic take him now?

Should he throw himself at the mercy of the American embassy, insist he’s a citizen of the United States, even if their only records would have him as a thirteen-year-old boy? Assuming any embassy he stumbles into is actually an embassy, and not just a fancy restaurant; Will a delusional lunatic raving and seeking asylum in its kitchens. Or perhaps logic would dictate he return to following the train tracks, and hope one of them leads him to the right decade?

Hannibal nods once and rises, slipping his art supplies into the leather satchel that hangs at his hip, waiting for Will to join him. It takes Will a moment to find the wherewithal to stand, but he’s an old hand at pushing himself beyond his limits. He holds onto his thighs and

pushes himself up like a man twice his age, and does his best not to limp too obviously as he follows Hannibal out into the Florentine streets.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Welcome back, and thanks for your comments and kudos so far - they make me a happy fannibal!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will follows his guide back into the maze of narrow passages and narrow buildings. The sun, no longer at its zenith, struggles to light more than the edges of the deep passageways between buildings. The long limbs of Hannibal's slighter frame keep an unhurried pace without conspicuously idling for Will's sake. It's very hard not to stare. So Hannibal. So *not* Hannibal.

"Where are we going?"

"I rent a small apartment nearby," the young man says breezily. "I have medical supplies and can treat your wounds there."

"Or kill me," Will mutters to himself, his exhaustion suggesting that this might not be so bad - this is all just too weird.

The comment, overheard, has Hannibal stopping to review him with some of his subdued surprise. "If you do not feel safe, I can retrieve the medical supplies and do my best to tend to you on the street."

"No, it's fine. Only… it wouldn't exactly be a surprise ending to my story if you finished me off. Lead on."

It's more honest than he's meaning to be, but lying takes energy and imagination. He has little enough energy, and his imagination has stalled trying to find explanations to his unprecedented predicament.

The inspection carries on a moment longer, and then the young man nods in acquiescence and walks on. A few more twists and turns, and then Will is led through a wooden door into one of the stone buildings. They wind up a tight staircase, ascending to the top floor, and Hannibal admits him into a high ceilinged apartment. By American standards it's not

enormous, but with its wooden beams, floor to ceiling windows and pale yellow walls, it manages to be airy and bright.

Hannibal shuts the door behind him, and the subtle thump of its closure startles Will. He clenches his hands into fists, fighting the urge to panic.

"Shall I take your coat?" Hannibal offers, acting oblivious to sudden discomfiture that must be blindingly obvious.

"Sure," Will says, wincing as he starts to shrug out of his coat, surprised when his space isn't invaded under the guise of chivalrous assistance. Instead, younger Hannibal merely waits politely, perhaps not bold enough yet to take such liberties, or simply less interested in Will than… original Hannibal. The headache that has been growing all day kicks up a notch, and he hands over his coat rubbing at his forehead with his free hand.

"Please, follow me."

Will trails after Hannibal, turning the corner into a kitchen with spotless white surfaces. The décor is simple, timeless in a way that doesn't aggravate his temporal dissonance.

As self-assured as ever, Hannibal sails between cupboards and sink, producing a glass of cold water to hand over without preamble. Will gulps it down without pausing for breath in a glorious moment of complete absorption, then blinks down at the empty glass gripped in his filthy fingers with something close to astonishment. The glass leaves his hand by way of long fingers, and returns refilled with water, the body transporting it standing a fraction closer now.

Will becomes acutely aware of how this Hannibal is still taller than him, still able to loom. He gets close to meeting his pupils, can't quite close the distance, staying on the swell of his lower lid.

"Thank you?" It wasn't meant to be a question.

"I will be back momentarily."

He looks around the suddenly empty room, feeling stranded in the centre of the tile floor. The space is immaculately clean, and he is covered in dirt and blood and sweat; touching any surfaces would be sacrilegious. A tall, slim window between cabinets looks across the intimate space to the building opposite, and he carries his glass of water with him to gaze down at the sunlit paving stones below. There are some potted plants, an empty terracotta urn, and an ageing cat with a torn ear dozing on a stone bench.

"There is a better view from the other side of the apartment."

Jesus fuck!

Ok, Hannibal has *clearly* already mastered moving like a ghost. Good to know.

He turns slowly, half expecting to see original Hannibal standing with a curved blade in his hand. Instead, the slender version stands, holding a first aid box. "Would you care to sit?"

Nodding dumbly, attention occupied with his cardiovascular arrhythmia, he pulls out the nearest chair and sits down gingerly. Unasked questions hover in Hannibal's silence, as he boils water and pours it into a small ceramic basin, placing this and a kidney shaped metal bowl on the table. He pulls up his own chair and sits, proceeding to shine a light in Will's eyes and test his reflexes. The questions he does go on to ask are not the ones he wishes answers to.

"Are you feeling any nausea?"

"Not really."

"Dizziness?"

"Maybe a little."

"Do you have a headache?"

"Yeah."

"How bad on a scale of one to ten?"

"Hah. That's pretty relative. Maybe a five, but I get migraines, and I've had NMDA Receptor Antibody Encephalitis, so..." Will trails off. Was that even a recognised thing in the 80s?

Hannibal shifts his posture slightly. "I am not aware of that specific variant, but I have heard Encephalitis is particularly painful, so I concur the pain scale might not be the best indicator. Let us try memory then. You were unsure about the year earlier, can you remember the month?"

Will tenses. He has absolutely no fucking idea what month it is. It's hot outside, Italy's in a temperate zone, cold in the winter. So… anywhere between April and September. The kids are still in school, when are the summer holidays in Europe?

"Uh. June?"

Hannibal doesn't answer. Will blinks at him.

"Well, is it?"

"It is nearing the end of May."

Shit. So fucking close. "Right. I don't keep too close an eye on the date."

"Who is the president of your country?"

1989… that was Reagan, no Bush, no Reagan. Fuck, when had they changed over? "Bush." He blurts out finally. Again, Hannibal provides neither confirmation nor denial.

"What is your name?"

Momentary pause, he knows that one at least, but should he tell Hannibal? Too annoying to maintain a false name; if this is the 1980s his real one might as well be as well be fake. “Will Graham.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Will Graham.” He proffers a hand, “Hannibal Lecter.”

“Nice to meet you,” Will mumbles, eyes skating over Hannibal’s as their hands clasp. His skin is softer. The uncomfortable feeling returns to his chest. *What the fuck is going on? I can’t really be sitting in a kitchen in Florence with a twenty-something year old Hannibal Lecter.*

“Where are you from?” The inquisition continues.

“Virginia, America.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a… teacher.”

“And what did you do last weekend?”

“Uh.” Well thirteen-year old Will was probably in Biloxi, but *his* last weekend? “I was in Palermo, the Norman chapel.”

“All weekend?”

“Well, yeah, actually.” *Twiddling my thumbs, speaking to ghosts and policemen, waiting for you.*

Another degree of intrigue tilts Hannibal’s head, and he closes his eyes briefly, before fixing them back on Will with something like serenity. “It is quite lovely, is it not?”

“Stunning,” Will admits, wondering if there really is something wrong with him; he has begun to feel quite breathless.

“How did you acquire these wounds?” Hannibal’s eyes break contact with his own, to glide over the surface of his face and take in the myriad cuts and bruises Will has not yet had a chance to see for himself.

Seeing no reason to lie, he waits for the dark eyes to return to his, “I was pushed from a train.”

He is glad he waited to hold eye contact. This Hannibal can’t conceal his emotions with quite the same proficiency as his counterpart, and he sees the information register as true and thrilling, before the blinds close again.

“So what do you think, Doctor? Do I have a concussion?”

A wry smile pulls at Hannibal’s lips. “I’m not a doctor yet. And I’m not sure; you display some symptoms, but nothing conclusive. If this were a hospital, I would recommend keeping

you in for observation. But, for now, I shall address your lacerations and abrasions."

Keep you in for observation. There's a terrifying thought, but as he considers the alternative, being patched up and then sent on his way, he wonders what the hell he's going to do for accommodation. Perhaps he can just crawl under a tree and go to sleep, and he will wake up again in the right decade. Will nods vaguely, feeling some kind of response is expected.

A tight smile, and Hannibal rips open a packet of sterile material to dip into the cooling boiled water. He begins to daub at the highest of the grazes on Will's forehead, starting high and moving lower, so any drops of dirty water that slide down won't contaminate freshly cleaned cuts. He removes the stained fabric and drops it in the metal dish. Leaning in with a fresh piece of wetted fabric, he begins tending the laceration across Will's cheekbone.

"You are visiting Italy on holiday?"

"I kind of took a sabbatical. I'm here, looking for… a friend." *Easy boy,* people don't usually say 'friend' with that much animosity.

Hannibal's curiosity leaks through the thinner mask. "Did your 'friend' push you off your train?"

"No. Hah. That was… a friend of the friend."

"Your friend has strange friends," Hannibal teases, and Will laughs more loudly than he perhaps should.

"He's pretty strange himself," Will smirks, and then wonders how such a challenging expression might appear to Hannibal without context.

Hannibal absorbs it smoothly, unruffled and apparently unconcerned by the ambiguous subtext. He sterilises a pair of tweezers with a noxious chemical, before leaning in to pull some small bits of grit from the wound, depositing them in the silver bowl with the bloodied fabric strips.

"I doubt these will scar."

"That's good."

The next strip of fabric cleans the cut across the bridge of his nose, and when the antiseptic is applied it makes his eyes sting.

Hannibal nods, leaning back. "You might want to remove your shirt."

There's something very uncomfortable about all this.

"Unless the blood soaked through it is not yours?" A glint of enamel in the fleeting smile.

"Uh. No, it is."

“If you like, once we have cleaned your wounds, I can gift you with a new shirt. It may be… less conspicuous.”

Brows drawing down, Will hums. Reluctantly, “Thanks… as long as it’s your cheapest shirt.”

This draws an amused chuckle. “I’m sure we can find something suitable.”

In all likelihood he believes Will is a wanted criminal, amnesic, crazy, or some combination thereof. If Hannibal is already killing, Will might make an attractive target, but if this apartment is registered in his name, it wouldn’t be smart bringing him here and handing over his clothes.

“How long have you lived in this apartment?” He starts to undo his shirt buttons, conscious he shouldn’t appear too spaced out when concussion is still on the table.

“A year and a half.”

“And in Florence?”

“The same.”

“How about before that?”

A fleeting smile, a little sad, “Paris.” His tone as light as ever.

Will shrugs out of the shirt and gathers it onto his lap self-consciously. The pink curve of his abdominal wound seems livid in the kitchen light, the gnarled scars in his shoulder paler than the skin around them. His Florence Nightingale slowly traces over each mark of violence with dark sucking pupils in an impassive face. “Teaching would appear to be a dangerous profession in Virginia, America.”

There’s no easy answer for that one. “It wasn’t meant to be,” said with enough real despondency and resignation that Hannibal stills a moment with his cloth above the bowl. The drips sound loud as they fall back into the water. He brings the fabric to Will’s neck and cleans the scratches there.

The gentle ministrations are delivered with placid concentration, and though the cuts burn when the antiseptic is applied, there is something soothing about being patched up by Hannibal; any Hannibal, it would appear.

The enormity of his implausible situation vies with the tranquillity and immediacy of the present moment. There are a great many things to think about, but right now his brain is foggy with fatigue, and as Hannibal moves to tend the graze on his shoulder, holding his head up is growing harder, and it starts to droop ever so slightly.

Hannibal’s eyes flash to his for a moment. “How long has it been since you last slept, Mr Graham?”

“Will. Seriously. I won’t be calling you *Mister* Lecter.” The aftertaste of the title alters the flavour of the surname, saying it out loud akin to eating caviar on a saltine cracker. “I got a few hours on the train, until about midnight I think.”

“You have been on your feet since then?”

“Yes.”

“I should like to let you rest. Do you know anyone in Florence?”

Certainly not in this decade. Where had Jack been stationed when he’d met Bella? “No.”

“That is a shame. Despite the frequent misconception, it is good to sleep after a blow to the head, but you must have someone wake you every few hours to ensure your condition has not deteriorated. The effects of a concussion can take a while to manifest, and I suspect being forcibly ejected from a moving train could have led to quite a blow.”

For a moment he seems to consider something, but Will is fairly confident the hesitation is for appearance’s sake. He can see where this is going. How delighted his Hannibal would be, if he knew that Will would be so at his mercy once again. How unfortunate that this Hannibal is unable to appreciate the full measure of his victory.

“Might I ask where you are staying?”

He scratches at the stubble grown prickly on his throat. “You can ask, but I won’t have an answer to give you.”

“I gather your belongings did not follow you off the train.”

Will has nothing to say to that, and it wasn’t phrased as a question.

“I have a spare room, you can get a few hours of sleep there, and when rested, you can use the phone to call the American embassy perhaps, or another friend?”

“You really don’t…” ah, who the hell is he kidding? “Thank you, that’s maybe a good idea.”

“But you may enjoy a shower first.” It is not a suggestion.

The guest room is white with wooden trim and furniture. It smells of timber, fresh sheets, and not much else. Will wonders if this is the first time the room has been used in the year and a half of Hannibal’s tenancy. Now clad in cream silk pyjama pants and a soft grey shirt, he dumps his filthy clothes on a chair that looks about five hundred years old.

He reaches out of the window to close the shutters and is forced to agree with Hannibal - the view from this side of the flat is remarkable. The window looks downhill toward the river, and as the buildings fall away, the strange geometries of the ancient skyline catch the

afternoon sun, shades of red and ochre and yellow below a hazy blue sky. The beauty is exhausting, flagrantly and rudely incompatible with his predicament; he closes the shutters on it all.

In keeping with the theme of the room, the bed is topped and tailed with wooden boards. Climbing into the tightly fitted sheets, he has the sense of sliding into the shroud of his own funeral barge; he wriggles with determination until the material has some give. Struggling against his stiff cotton restraints uses the last of his energy, and he lets the tide carry him into the confused currents of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters start getting a little bit longer from here on out (3 thou instead of 2ish) as the story gets going :)

Do share your thoughts, I love interacting with the community!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three hours of sleep seem to imbue him with a semi-lucid clarity, and what has become clear is he can only act on what his perceptions show him. Due credit to his delusion, the numbing persistence of subjective reality is as unforgiving as always. With the shutters opened, the light flooding in is just as abrasive as that of 2016, the dust motes dance in convincingly unpredictable patterns, and the faint melody on the breeze is unlikely to be one conjured from his subconscious.

The smoother planes of Hannibal's face seem just as persuasive as the rest of the scene.

If he is insane, he'll have to cross that bridge when he comes to it. For now, he must behave as though he has travelled back in time – ludicrous as the thought may be. He can only respond to the stimuli he is presented with.

Hannibal sits on the edge of his bed and checks Will's pupil responses and, satisfied, instructs him to sleep further. Will is fourteen years older than this Hannibal, where he was thirteen years younger than the previous one. The age difference is no impediment to Hannibal's authoritative air, and Will wonders how this goes down with his lecturers at the university.

With a nod, he acquiesces, and Hannibal closes the shutters and leaves him in shadow. With the door closed, he stares at the false darkness of the ceiling, thin rays of light escaping through the joins in the shutters to paint distorted lines across the far corner of the room. His eyes travel the tracks they leave and he remembers the hypothetical question: if you could go back in time and kill Hitler…

The obvious answer was yes, you'd do it, of course. But then, you have to think about the butterfly effect and all the paradoxes; rewriting history and having no recognisable future to return to, or cancelling out your own existence. Well, Will doesn't know about what kind of ripples averting a genocide and a world war might cause, but surely expunging one nascent serial killer is unlikely to change the shape of the world? Fuck it – the butterfly can go wherever it wants as long as it doesn't lead them all to Hannibal's dinner table again.

He's already been born, so he's safe in that respect, but what about other paradoxes? If he changes things so that he never meets Hannibal Lecter, will he wake up at in Wolf Trap without the scars? Without the memories? It would mean he never comes to Europe, never gets pushed off a train, never winds up in the past to be in this position to change the future; and so history would just snap back again. Being stuck in a time-loop with Hannibal certainly sounds like the punch line to his cosmic joke of an existence.

He wraps his arms around his head and digs crescents into the back of his neck. What if appearing here in Hannibal's past is what created the other man's obsession in the future? What if he had latched his dark claws into the meat of Will's brain because he had met Will

before, in his youth, only to be presented with him – unaffected by the passage of years – in Jack's office?

A person could go crazy trying to puzzle it out. *Could a crazy person go sane trying to solve the same puzzle?* It just makes his headache worse.

He needs some kind of plan. He can't just flounder forever. Even if the raft he makes is constructed with rotten wood, at least it will float for a while. Understanding Hannibal Lecter had been the ambition behind visiting Lithuania. On the rail tracks, he had once again chosen to understand Hannibal. He hadn't quite expected *this* opportunity, but his intestines churn at the prospect of buddying up with Hannibal two decades before they first meet. Surely he should be using this 'opportunity' to stop the Ripper and save all those lives?

Perhaps the fact that Hannibal exists in his past – the future – is evidence enough that Will *doesn't* succeed in stopping him here in the past – present… Will throws off the bed sheets with an impatient snarl and clambers to his feet, disgusted by his horizontal position when so much needs solving. He feels impotent, the need for action thwarted by inexplicable environmental conditions.

He opens the shutters again, and looks out across the rooftops, to where the timeless towers of Florence reach toward the empty heavens. The flat isn't empty; somewhere behind him, beyond the closed door, is his own personal demonic deity, the dark creature who took his clay and remoulded it with joyful abandon. Maybe Hannibal really is the devil, maybe *Hannibal* has somehow sent him back in time. He laughs out a breath and palms his face.

He is wearing the pyjamas graciously provided by his host. His own clothes have now disappeared, which is such a typical Hannibal power play that he yanks the door open and stalks through the flat. On the way he sees his coat is no longer hanging by the door, and he suspects that means his knife and postcard are gone too – the only things he has of the past. The future. *Fuck this time travel bullshit.*

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, he finds Hannibal sitting with a textbook and a cup of tea. He looks up with a mild expression on his face, startlingly convincing in its innocence.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asks into Will's aborted charge.

"Where are my clothes?" Will manages to keep the majority of his frustration out of his voice.

"In the wash."

"And, my belongings?"

The teacup rises to the refined mouth, a temperate sip, and then, impartially, "Your knife?"

"Yes."

"It is polite to relinquish your weapons upon entering a gentleman's home. I thought I might return it to you at the end of your stay."

“Rather I stab you with one of your own knives, would you?” The growl slips out of his throat without any censorship on Will’s part.

Hannibal leans back in his seat with an appraising smile on his face, wrists braced against the edge of the table. Will reminds himself that ‘younger’ doesn’t mean more vulnerable. The broad shoulders are trimmer, the neck more slender, the mask less precise; it would be nice to believe he has some kind of advantage over this Hannibal. It really doesn’t feel like it.

“You have the aspect of a caged animal, Mr Graham, but I assure you: you may leave at any time.”

Much as he would like to test that theory, he doesn’t particularly want to leave, and Hannibal is already using that fond tone with a note of rebuke, the one that always gets a modicum of shame stirring in him. Hackles slowly lowering, Will searches for some way to take control of this conversation. Hannibal doesn’t give him the chance.

“Assuming of course that you don’t truly intend to injure me, you are also welcome to stay.”

“I’m sorry, I just. I-” What excuse does he have that could possibly make sense? His eyes flash around the kitchen in distress, looking for some inspiration. His lungs contract as Hannibal stands and moves around the table to stand in front of him.

This is it, this is the end. He’ll produce a knife from nowhere and gut him like he had in Baltimore. And Will will die, as he should have in Baltimore.

He straightens his shoulders, mouth trembling, eyes locked on Hannibal’s and tickling as they fill with water. A hand comes up to rest lightly on his shoulder. Yes, this is how it starts, with a gentle touch… but instead of the searing punch of the blade, Hannibal cants his head and speaks softly, looking down between them. Will looks too.

“I think I understand. You have been wounded.” One fingers brushes lightly across the loose fabric of the night-shirt, following the path the knife should be making. “You feel vulnerable, and wish the means to defend yourself.” He lifts his eyes and collects a tear from Will’s cheek with his thumb, holds it up clinically for Will to examine, “This is a trauma response.”

“What do you want?” Will asks, trembling.

“For now, I would like to feed you. You are in terrible shape. May I?”

Will nods. How could he refuse, when he knows how much Hannibal enjoys it, when he’s desperately hungry, when they both seem to know how punishingly limited his options are.

Guided to a chair, Will sits in a stupor as Hannibal tidies away his textbooks and brings out fresh ingredients for preparation. He watches the precise way Hannibal rolls up his sleeves and washes his hands, puts on his apron, and begins to cut thin strips from courgettes, all his movements graceful, if marginally less automatic than his counterpart.

Words emerge from Will's daze, and he lets them float out through his mouth, "You've always been ahead of your years, haven't you? How many people have called you an 'old soul'? Do any of your contemporaries spend their afternoons replicating the works of renaissance masters, patching up and feeding wayward travellers?"

A slight tension mars Hannibal's otherwise fluid movements, though his expression doesn't change bar a slight tightening of his scalp. "I am hoping that my anatomical sketches might give me the edge when I apply for an internship at Johns Hopkins. Sketching within the halls of the Uffizi allows me to both appreciate the masterworks and hone my skills."

"I'll be sure to write you a patient reference, if I make it out of here alive." Apparently Will's bitterness is unwilling to be parted from the bleak humour that pervades him, cloaking the more insidious underlying panic at the whole time-travel/losing his mind thing.

"You seem rather preoccupied with the concept of death, Will. With your trust issues, I wonder why you were more inclined to come with me than to seek medical attention at a hospital?"

"I don't like hospitals," he murmurs darkly.

"Then you really must do better at not needing them."

Will barks out a laugh, and is quite captivated by the meek hesitancy to Hannibal's responding smile. It occurs to Will that perhaps this Hannibal is not yet so fully entrenched in his self-assurance, at least… not around an older man with a dangerous past and unpredictable friends, a man with a darkness that mirrors his own.

It's Hannibal's own darkness inside him; of course he recognises it. Will shivers.

When supper is presented, Will is reasonably sure it's not long-pig. It does, however, come with games.

"Tell me, Will, can you remember any major news events from this year?"

"Um…" He takes his bite and keeps his face carefully neutral as he chews. He knows the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, but was that before or after the summer? His eidetic memory isn't quite set up for the global events of his personal history. "The Exxon oil spill." He remembers that, remembers the low simmering boil of the fishing community's anger. It didn't directly affect the people on the Gulf, but water folk are all one tribe. "Oh, Ted Bundy." That was definitely at the start of the year. He gestures with a fork, pointing at Hannibal, "Ted Bundy met Old Sparky."

"Pardon?"

"The electric chair. Bundy got fried."

Feeling smug, Will takes another bite of pastry. Two things from twenty seven years ago. That's not bad. He thinks the Galileo space launch was later in the year, he remembers

watching it in Mrs Gant's class.

Hannibal chews and considers the flavours on his tongue, affording Will a quiet moment, curtailed too quickly by the next question. "Can you remember where or when the last Olympics took place?"

Tilting his head, he tries to remember when the last Olympics were in *his* time, then he could jump back in fours… How many people kept track of the Olympics anyway?

He shrugs. "I'm not sure."

"Popular films?"

"Pfft. No, I don't really…"

"World leaders?"

Will's shoulders slump, "Doctor-" He stops, catching himself, but Hannibal takes the slip as a reprimand and laughs.

"My apologies, Will. I find your condition difficult to ascertain. I hope you don't mind my saying there is a trace of… deflection, in your answers that is not facilitating a diagnosis."

"I'm answering your questions honestly." He shrugs, "But sometimes the truth is harder to explain, and harder to believe."

The fires in Hannibal's eyes burn brighter, and it hits Will that this was a foolish thing to say. He's just laying on the intrigue, slathering it on without even thinking. Maybe it's his self-preservation instincts at work – then again, those have become hard to distinguish from his self-destructive impulses.

Hannibal lets him eat for a while in a companionable silence, a small smile lingering on his lips as he enjoys his own meal. Eventually he breaks in with, "Do you have family back home?"

"Not anymore. You?" He knows the answer, but it would be impolite not to ask.

"Not anymore." Nothing slips through the mask this time, it is held so rigidly in place that it is almost over-compensation; indistinguishable from the real thing for anyone who hasn't climbed inside of Hannibal's head. He redirects the conversation, a conductor smoothing over rough chords. "And what of this 'friend' you seek?"

Will cants an eyebrow at the inflection of his sentence. "Perhaps you could ask a more precise question."

An amused flush on his high cheekbones, dark eyes batting as the lips twist at the rebuke. "Does he want to be found?"

"He's not making it easy, but I'd say yes, very much."

“What will you do when you find him?”

Inspector Pazzi and Chiyoh have both asked him this, and now Hannibal himself. Will still doesn’t have an answer. Trying to answer the question takes him on a carnival ride through the dark twisted streets of his own mind.

He wants… he wants… he wants to cut into Hannibal, spill his blood and see him fall to his knees… the thought makes him quiver. But he also wants… wants to cling to him and sob and seek forgiveness, absolution, a reprieve from all the endless guilt - guilt for wanting to kill, guilt for betraying Hannibal. He thinks of the display left in the chapel at Palermo: a broken man, a broken heart. He thinks of Randall Tier; the knife-edge moment where he had nearly killed Freddy Lounds; his own quiet words, visible in a condemning cloud of vapour in the cold winter air: ‘*I wanted to run away with him.’* Part of him still wants that too.

Hannibal’s pupils seem to be swimming blacker and blacker, hypnotic beneath his smooth curved brows. Only then does Will realise he’s been staring at Hannibal with the vehement anger, aching vulnerability, and repressed bloodlust on full exposure across his face. He scrabbles for opacity, but it hardly matters now.

The plump cushions of Hannibal’s finely shaped lips are wetted slowly as he takes a breath. “I’m not sure if I pity or envy this friend you seek, but your expression promises quite the reunion.”

Closing his eyes and opening them slowly on the table, he carefully places his cutlery side by side on his plate. “I think I need more sleep. Thank you for supper.”

“Of course, although, I’m afraid I will be coming to check on you again in three hours.”

Will tries to protest but is cut off with a tone that will brook no argument; a tone he knows well. “It is for your own good, and a condition of your staying here, I am afraid.”

Will wakes thrashing, throat raw and face wet with tears, Hannibal fiercely gripping his forearms. He swears and fights a moment longer, before realising that Hannibal is merely holding him steady and whispering soothing susurrations in a foreign language. Not tearing out his organs. Not severing his throat.

“Hannibal?”

The tight hold relaxes slightly. “Are you with me again, Will?”

He pants and shakes, head dropping forward with relief and shame. “Yes.” His wrists are released and he folds them protectively across his torso, the punishing grip of Hannibal's fingers seared into the skin. He feels too hot and simultaneously chilled.

Hannibal stands to open the shutters again, and an evening breeze steals into the room, immediately sweet as it cuts through the heavy stink of fear sweat. Sitting back on the edge

of the bed, Hannibal serves Will a careful expression of false repentance.

"Forgive me for handling you roughly, I believe you were experiencing a night terror."

"Was I?" His voice sounds flat to his own ears. His heart is still thundering, gallons of blood pounding through his veins. He wipes a trickle of perspiration from one side of his nose, brings his head up again to meet Hannibal's cool appraisal.

"What were you dreaming of?"

"My friend," he says it quietly, the many layers and inadequacies of the word as a descriptor seeping into his enunciation.

"You fear greatly for your friend. Or, he inspires a great deal of fear in you."

Even Will's stomach muscles are engaged in his battle not to turn his face away. "He… is my friend. He is also… a monster."

"The term *monster* comes with many preconceptions, chief among them, threat and invulnerability. A monster is hard to defeat – a man is not. You need to see the man, only then can you defeat him."

Nodding at the advice, he swallows thickly. "You think I want to defeat him?"

An avian tilt to his head. "It seemed probable, am I wrong? Perhaps you merely wish to join your monster?"

Another dose of cold water; *just how insightful is this intelligent psychopath?*

Hannibal lowers his voice, still pitched for Will's ears, "Perhaps you don't yet know yourself."

Too insightful. He shivers and dry swallows again. "Can I have some water please?"

"Is your throat sore, Will? I'm not altogether surprised." Hannibal leans forward conspiratorially. "You were shouting my name. Quite loudly." He straightens his posture again. "I expect the neighbours are quite certain I've murdered you." His smile is muted in the low light, but his eyes gleam with their own mirth.

Licking his chapped lips with a tongue that threatens to stick to the cracked flesh, Will tries abysmally to match the jovial tone. "I guess you'll have to let me walk out of here alive then. If you don't want them gossiping."

"And find a more secluded spot to kill you, I suppose?" Said with soft humour, but there's a hunger there too.

Will searches his eyes. "Maybe."

"You will just have to stay in the apartment then, for you own safety."

“What about your safety?”

Hannibal reaches out and strokes the lobe of Will’s ear with a thumb, tugs it lightly. “Yes, I’m curious about that.” He drops his hand and stands. “I’ll get you some water.”

He is left reeling, partly at the unexpectedly playful contact, and partly at the information exchanged. He had admitted to dreaming of his ‘friend’, while apparently screaming Hannibal’s name, and god knows what else. At the very least this tells Hannibal he is already deep within Will’s nightmares; he is likely curious as to the capacity in which he features.

Will collapses back onto the bed, wishing he could just be buried in the ground with a feeding tube and an air supply. Why had he ever stopped Stammets? Maybe he could write a letter to his thirteen-year old self, suggesting he let old Eldon off the hook next time around.

Boy, does he not envy that kid the journey ahead of him.

The thought makes his eyes sting, and he wants to slap himself for the self-pity.

The door opens, and his own personal demon strides back into the room, glass in hand. Will hates how his heart lurches every time he sees him, hates how his stomach is jerked along with it, nausea curdling at the rude jolt.

After months on his own, it’s not *good* to see Hannibal. It’s stagnant water at the tale end of a drought; a bittersweet relief, awful, but *necessary.*

Chapter End Notes

I said this was slow burn right? It’s pretty slow… but hey guess what! They actually leave the apartment in the next chapter!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Hello lovely Fannibals! I'm loving hearing from you and am very grateful for your support!
>
> Writing this is great fun in and of itself, but it feels less like a self-indulgent romp through my imagination if I'm bringing some other people some entertainment too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Impossibly, this Hannibal is even more energetic in the mornings.

Will is woken by the seven o'clock bells, lies for a moment in a blanket of depression, then scrambles from his room when he hears the apartment door shut, absurdly afraid of being left alone. But this is Hannibal returning. From a run, by the looks of it: grey and red jogging bottoms, a white t-shirt that sticks to the planes of his body, his hair a little wild, colour high on his cheeks. A brown paper bag and keys gripped in one hand, a cassette player in the other, looping up to a pair of headphones.

Ignoring the panic on Will's face and the embarrassment that follows it, Hannibal slides the headphones onto the back of his neck, and holds up the paper bag. His eyes are bright, and he is slightly out of breath. "Breakfast?"

Quickly laying out the offering in the kitchen, he starts the coffee percolating, and places a grapefruit on a slab of wood with a pointed knife. He tilts an eyebrow at Will and retreats for a quick shower. Yes, Will gets the instruction and the implication within the implement. Yes, he is trusted with a knife.

"Are you familiar with Stephen Hawking?" Hannibal asks as he sits down with wet hair and reaches for his half of the grapefruit. Will snorts. Even in his first tour of 1989 Will had known who Hawking was.

"Yeah, I've read *Brief History*," he says, reasonably confident it had been published by now, even if he hadn't properly read it 'til his twenties.

"Have you ever read any of his academic papers?"

"I'm not that kind of academic."

A quizzical gleam. "What kind of academic is that?"

"You know, the physics kind."

“Neither am I.”

“Yeah, but you’re a polymath,” Will scoffs, then the passage the spoon to his mouth slows. He flicks his eyes up to Hannibal’s face. His eyes have softened into that patient predatory humour. “I mean, your art, your cooking, your doctoring…”

A small tilt of acknowledgement, then, “And what *are* you an academic of?”

Will tastes blood and realises he’s biting his lip. It stings when he licks it, the residual citrus on his tongue. Il Monstro might be less than pleased at the idea of a forensic criminologist as a guest.

“Psychology.” Hannibal looks surprised and Will feels a flush of irritation. “What, don’t seem sane enough to teach psychology?” It’s said with a laugh, but the defensiveness is bald.

Hannibal graciously steps around the comment. “Another career I considered.”

“But surgery sounded sweeter did it?”

“I have not yet chosen my specialism.”

“Ah.” Will nods, “Maybe you’ll go for psychiatry then.” He looks off around the kitchen, taking a sip of coffee. It’s kind of fun being Mystic Meg.

A moment of that unnatural stillness particular to Hannibal; Will has seen it in his older version, and never been entirely sure if it’s irritation or a rapid reshuffling of the cards in his hand.

“Can you tell me how you came to be in the Uffizi gallery yesterday? What passed between being pushed from your train and stopping before The Primavera?”

“A lot of walking.” The coffee is strong and dark and bitter.

“Where were you travelling from?”

The smile that bares Will’s teeth is equal parts humour and primal defense. “Still trying to see if I’m concussed?”

“You seem somewhat improved today. Although your infection of deflection remains.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It could be.”

“What’s the treatment?”

“Fresh air and exercise. This is your first time in Florence?”

“I- yes.”

“Then there are many things I should like to show you. If I may be your guide?”

“Um. Don’t you have school?”

“Fortunately, they do not schedule university lectures over the weekend. It is Saturday, if you weren’t sure.”

“Oh. Then, that would be nice. Thank you.” Will suspects he might be blushing. He frowns at his coffee, daring the hot drink to mock him for it.

The morning passes quickly. Will is shown around the city in Hannibal’s clothes, Hannibal himself a fount of knowledge, and each street corner somehow instrumental in Florence’s noble (and sometimes scandalous) history.

Just as the ache in his bones and the bruises on his feet begin to grumble mutinously, Hannibal pulls out a chair and offers Will a seat at an outside restaurant table. “Time for lunch, I think.”

Will sits gratefully, looking around the plaza with its fine architecture and sculptured fountain. “Why would you go to America? It must feel so… one dimensional compared to Europe.” He means the history, or relative lack of it. Hannibal sees Florence and he’s not just seeing 1989, he’s seeing its entire past, all occupying the same space.

Gracefully shrugging a shoulder, “One cannot dwell too long in history, the present must always assert itself.”

The sentiment brings a sharp, sour taste to Will’s tongue. “I hope you’re right,” he grumbles.

A bored looking waiter arrives and passes them menus while looking over their heads in disinterest. Will sees Hannibal’s expression pinch.

“Grazie,” he says, unsuccessfully angling for eye contact, and the waiter grunts and moves off. Directing his eyes to the menu, Hannibal does a good impression of turning his attention there too, but Will can see restless tectonic plates grinding behind the umber eyes.

“Probably hates his life.” Will offers, conciliatory; surely a man didn’t deserve to die for so little?

“Perhaps he should be relieved of it.”

Will narrows his eyes. “Relieved. As in grateful, right?”

A twitch of Hannibal’s lips, “That’s certainly one definition as I understand it.”

Another bark of a laugh escapes Will, at the sheer audacity of the man. He tries to focus on the menu, but can feel Hannibal’s satisfaction radiating from the other side of the table.

Conscious that Hannibal will be footing the bill and he’s already in the other man’s debt, he picks the cheapest dish off the menu. He doesn’t need anything fancy, he’s already on

sensory overload in this time/place. The differences are mostly subtle, but pervasive, though he will admit it's refreshing to see the world without cell phones in every hand.

Their waiter returns and stands, aggrieved, with biro and notepad in hand. "Prego."

Once glance at Hannibal is enough to shut Will's mouth. His eyes are boring into the waiter's averted ones, patently refusing to answer until contact is established. Even from here, the look chills Will's blood, sensation retreating from his extremities to cower in his core.

Without even the preservation instincts of a flea, the waiter finally drags his eyes to Hannibal and gawps at him impatiently. "Allora?"

The smile he receives in response could have cut the Gordian knot, and certainly Hannibal would prefer Alexander's method to solving this obstacle.

Will blurts out his own selection, unable to stand the stretching tension. Both men look at him in surprise. It breaks the standoff at least, and Hannibal solicitously requests his order. The man nods and stalks off, and Will breathes a sigh of relief.

"I apologise if I made you uncomfortable, Will."

"It's alright." Will looks up without lifting his head, he's toying with the edge of the napkin, and with an idea he should definitely ignore; but doesn't. "Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to you."

Silently, Hannibal's breath catches – a momentary lapse before his eyes slide away, feigning interest in a passing tour group. "It is a disgrace," he murmurs in agreement.

It is Will's turn to devour Hannibal with what must be a predatory gaze; he feels the power of his advantage properly for the first time. A heady sensation that he could get used to, but it must be oh so carefully wielded.

The delicious moment of imbalance in their power dynamic is transient, but resonates as the first fleeting moment where Will feels he had the upper hand. Not to maim, but to *dig in*, as Hannibal had.

Perhaps he's been doing it since he first arrived, unintentionally, but this was deliberate. And it felt… good.

God, but if he manipulates Hannibal now, it only justifies Hannibal's actions later.

Somewhere inside, an emergency release valve is pulled, and the good feeling is dumped out of him like radioactive waste.

In the square, a flock of pigeons erupt as a small child runs through them, flapping his own arms in an effort to join them.

Will would like to feel innocent and uncorrupted again, but he can't while holding onto this bitterness. And, if he ends up being the one who shaped Hannibal… then *he* is the

monster. He'll have to be much more careful with how he's behaving. Maybe it's not too late to leave, find some way back to America. He can find a way, adapt, buy some stocks and shares. He can leave Hannibal to do whatever Hannibal was going… to… do… anyway?

He wants to smack his head off the table, or perhaps stab into his hand with that convenient fork right there.

"Are you alright, Will?"

No. No he is not alright. This *must* be hell or purgatory, there is no other *possible* explanation. He has been sent here to learn that he is *personally* responsible for *everything* that has gone wrong in his life. He can't look up to meet Hannibal's burning eyes, because his own are burning in a much less impressive way. He's keeping his breathing measured, but obviously he's a wreck; swinging between smug insight and nervous breakdown.

A cool palm comes to rest on his forearm, where he is gripping onto the table for reassurance.

"You're breathing well, Will. In, hold. Out, hold. In, hold…" He matches the pace of Will's breaths and then gradually slows the rhythm, keeping the exhalations longer than the inhalations, and Will follows, until he can nod and breathe on his own.

His lungs might be behaving again, but his eyes aren't. They're leaking profusely, and Will laughs at his own inability to hold them in check. He wants to disappear; can't imagine running away in tears, or fleeing into the confined, populated restaurant. He wants to climb under the paving stones and burrow into the Earth.

Hannibal places several thousand lira on the table and moves around to stand at Will's side. "Come, we will have better food and service in my kitchen."

The direct route back is much faster than their earlier sightseeing meander, and while moving through the city helps keep a lid on the worst of his emotional over-boil, every time he looks at Hannibal it rises up again: hot and wet and sticky in his throat, nauseating and painful and incomprehensible. And this isn't even a Hannibal he can blame.This Hannibal is, to all intents and purposes, innocent. Has only tried to help him, whatever Will *knows* about his future, their future.

He sits on the low settee in the living room, and Hannibal crouches before him. Soft fingers find the pulse point on his wrist, and he consults his wristwatch sombrely. Will can't help but laugh at the earnest picture he paints, the consummate example of someone playing doctor. Hannibal glances at him reproachfully.

"Sorry," Will murmurs, still shaking, but managing a smile, which must be good news. A few minutes later his head stops spinning and he sags back against the couch, arm across his face, exhausted. When he lifts his arm, Hannibal has vanished; he drapes the fold of his elbow back over his eyes. Silence, the distant trill of a sparrow. A touch at his knee, and he doesn't flinch in surprise. He squints his way back into the light, and reaches for the glass of water with a sigh from the beleaguered depths of his soul.

“Thank you. I want… to thank you. You’ve been so kind to me. You don’t even know me.” He sighs again, drinks appreciatively.

As he did with the waiter, Hannibal waits until Will is looking at him before gracing him with a smile, but this small curl of his lips is not to wound; it is a beautiful gift. “Not yet perhaps,” Hannibal perches on the edge of the couch, “but you are most welcome, Will. Can you tell me what triggered the trauma response? So that we might avoid it in the future?”

“That wasn’t PTSD,” Will says. “I may have… some kind of PTSD, but that was just a mild panic attack.”

“You don’t seem very concerned.”

“I did say it was mild,” Will sneers back, and then remembers the reference will be lost on this Hannibal and he probably just sounds deranged again. He rubs his fingers roughly through his hair, digging at his scalp. “There’s only one person who can help me, who’s ever been able to help me, and he’s… fundamentally inaccessible.”

“I recall you thanking me for my help, barely a minute ago, so perhaps that full statement is not as true as it feels in this moment.”

A small hurt chuff hiccups from Will’s mouth; part laugh, part whimper, all misery. “You have no idea.”

“Try me.”

Of course, Hannibal loves a challenge, but this is where the ground gets boggy. Of all the people he mustn’t tell this story to, Hannibal’s name is in bold at the top of that list. And yet, he is the only one he wants to tell, and right now he is *desperate* to do so. Careful, *careful*. *Pick your words.*

“I… thought he was my friend. And then I thought he wasn’t. But I think, he still thought he was. And… we hurt each other.” Will wriggles uncomfortably. “He… started a transformation he didn’t finish, I’m stuck. Half one thing, half another.” He gestures uselessly, “And reality seems to be breaking down around me, because I can’t entirely believe my senses – but I can’t discount them either. They… they’re all I have.”

A respectful moment of silence, then, kindly, “Our senses are all any of us truly have. If you feel you can’t trust your senses, then you can’t trust anything. A terrifying position to find oneself in.” Hannibal reaches down and takes his hand from where it's gripping the sofa cushion. He turns it palm up and strokes along the centre, from wrist to tip of middle finger, sending a spark of sensation up Will's nerve endings. “But, I would urge you to rely on them; focus on the present moment. Really listen and look, smell and feel. Taste.”

Hannibal turns Will’s hand again, and brings the knuckles to his lips, brushing lightly against them, not quite a kiss. Then he licks his lips, as though he can taste Will that way, and who knows, maybe Hannibal can. He blinks lazily, “Reality changes every moment, we can only control what we do in the now.” Speechless, Will lets Hannibal position his hand back on the sofa. He looks thoughtfully down at where he has placed it, as though he might adjust

it, before standing smoothly. “Now, I believe you were promised lunch.” Hannibal swans from the room.

Time – not content with taking Will backwards – now stutters and stalls.

Um… did Hannibal just… come on to him?

There are several different ways to freak out about this. Or, there is the most mature method of all: pretend it never happened. Acknowledge nothing.

The afternoon passes more smoothly. Will doesn’t wish to sleep again, so they while away the hours on the balcony with books, and Hannibal periodically fetches them cool drinks or coffee. There is no more talk of concussions, embassies, Will’s ‘friend’, or his confiscated possessions.

As the sun sets, Hannibal moves them onto wine. Neither of them indulges too heavily, in alcohol or conversation. It's comfortable, a welcome reprieve from the darker truths that have been hounding Will, for all that it's built on an impermanent foundation. After dinner, there’s a clear crisp piano concerto playing on Hannibal’s stereo, and bats dip and dart through the still night air. Will is half reclined, feet up on the balcony railing. Between the soothing melody and the high calls of the bats at the edge of his hearing, Will finds himself dozing on the cusp of strange dreams.

“Go to bed, Will.” Hannibal squeezes his ankle affectionately. Platonically.

It sounds like a good idea, and it is, right through all the trivial preparations until he climbs between the sheets, and suddenly his fatigue deserts him. One hour ticks by, and then two, and he’s no closer to willing himself to sleep when he hears the quiet ‘snick’ of the front door closing.

The same panic that roused him in the morning hurls him out of bed again, and he’s got his trousers on over his silk pyjamas and his feet in his shoes and is pulling on one of Hannibal’s coats as he flings himself out of the apartment and out of the building. The street outside is deserted, but he makes himself close the door quietly and says a silent prayer to the antlered god, before jogging down the street to the main thoroughfare they had travelled before.

Some distance away, an unmistakeable silhouette is heading back into the city centre with a determined stride. Will ties his shoelaces, and follows.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for any mistakes, I do read through and edit, but sometimes miss things!

Currently writing chapter 9 and nearing the end of the story arc... I think my word count projections are pretty on point, might be closer to the higher end of the estimate by the time I'm done :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Welcome back!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal seems to be retracing their steps back to the plaza of their abandoned lunch, and Will feels reasonably confident hazarding a guess to the purpose of this midnight stroll.

At this hour, the nightlife is picking up, and the restaurants are winding down. Some quieter places are already bringing tables and chairs inside, finished for the night. Ahead of him, Hannibal's posture changes. His stride shortens, slows, his shoulders loosen, and he becomes just another young Florindo on the street at night, hoping to find his Beatrice. A bar with outdoor seating occupies the corner where street meets the square, cigarette smoke drifting out its open door, and Hannibal finds a stool outside.

Will hangs back, glances into the square to see their unfortunate waiter still ferrying coffees, and retreats back down the street to another restaurant with people seated outside. From here he can no longer see their lunchtime restaurant, but Hannibal's back is comfortably within his sights.

Just as a waiter comes to take Hannibal's order, a petite waitress with long dark hair appears at Will's side. She bats her lashes at him and communicates apologetically that they are no longer taking orders. Nodding emphatically to show he understands and takes no offense, Will manages to stumble his way through asking if he can rest there for a few minutes. She looks at the other customers who are still embedded in their conversations, pouts prettily and answers with a toss of her head, "Figurati."

He doesn't know what that means, but her tone is light and she leaves him be. His eyes fix on the back of Hannibal's head, and a moment later she returns with a glass of ice water and a wink before sashaying off again.

He takes a refreshing sip as he resumes his stakeout. Her kindness and the clandestine adventure under the cover of night bring him into good spirits, and a half hour or so passes quickly. When the final customers leave, Will takes his cue and stands too, crossing to the other side of the street and resuming his vigil. Loitering like this would be less conspicuous if he had a cell phone… no, not in this decade it wouldn't; a cigarette then – something to occupy his hands.

To Will's relief, Hannibal's head tilts back as he swallows the last of his wine and rises to his feet, leaving bank notes and strolling into the square. Trailing a safe distance away, Will

notes their former restaurant is dark and closed up. He cannot see the waiter, but presumably he is ahead of Hannibal.

The crowds thin as their quarry takes them into a more residential district, and Will is forced to close the gap as the streets narrow and intersect with greater rapidity. These quieter streets, designed before man first dreamed of their wide automobiles, hold their breath as he continuous his ill-advised pursuit.

Passing between ancient structures of bare stone or plaster, some with wooden beams, others with barred windows and ornate, cast iron street lanterns protruding from their flaking walls, he feels even more acutely that he is a spectre of the future; a spectator of the past. He is chasing shadows as they disappear around corners, catching stolen glimpses of shoulder or heel, a flap of coat. Walking quickly, pausing, listening, *but he's so quiet.* Cautiously looking around the edge of each building, half terrified he'll lose Hannibal - half terrified he'll run into the back of him.

They seem to be walking for miles, Will's own efforts to tread softly taking their toll. He has completely lost his bearings now, and his pursuit is no longer driven by curiosity, but by necessity; he is utterly dependent on following Hannibal back out of this rabbit warren.

When he inevitably loses him, coming out into a small square with a paved-over well and too many passages leading off from it, he has no energy left for frustration. He sinks onto the bricked-up ledge and sighs out his defeat. A light turns off in one of the windows above. The streetlamp paints the paved square in yellow light and thick black shade, a faint angry buzz coming from the bulb.

This had clearly been a terrible idea.

"Night. When life is most like a dream." The words are said from close behind him, and Will startles round to see Hannibal standing on the other side of the well, regarding him consideringly. Chiyoh had said the same words, before she pushed him off a train. He is suddenly immensely glad that the well is bricked up.

"Hannibal," he quietly greets.

"Good evening, Will. How have you enjoyed your night-time tour of Florence?"

His groan of exasperation is caught by the tightening in his throat. "Were you actually following the waiter at any point?"

"In fact I was. He entered his own residence perhaps fifteen minutes ago." Will nods grimly, and Hannibal cocks an eyebrow. "How were you planning on getting back into the flat unnoticed?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," he admits, brows rising, mouth an unhappy line. Hannibal begins to circle around the well, and Will walks too, keeping them on opposite sides of the squat walls. The other pauses and smiles.

"Were you concerned for the waiter? You made an excuse for him at the table."

"Yes."

Apparently his tone gives away more than he would like, because Hannibal goes on to ask the unspoken word that had crept into his answer, "And?"

"And… I didn't like being left alone." Will winces at the taste of own pitiability, but Hannibal is unperturbed.

"What did you imagine I might do to him?"

"I… thought you'd hurt him."

"Would you have stopped me?"

"I don't know," he really doesn't. Maybe he would have watched from the shadows. Maybe he would have wanted to join in. Creating the Dragonfly in the castle wine cellar had been... invigorating, intoxicating.

He is gifted with another of Hannibal's languid blinks. He knows, *knows,* how much coiled muscle and aggression lurks beneath the surface of that calm façade; how the tranquil expressions and reassuring movements can snap into cold antipathy and deadly accuracy. When Hannibal resumes pacing around the circumference of the well, Will allows his approach, the part of him that has already accepted he will die by Hannibal's hand taking the helm. Will it be disembowelment? A slash across the throat? A quieting hand over his mouth as he sinks the tip of his blade into Will's kidney?

Will Hannibal display Will's corpse? Perhaps he would find another convenient victim and stage Zephyr and Chloris, his homage to the Primavera.

Hannibal stops before Will and is unsuccessfully subtle as he scents the air around him. The universal cant of curiosity tilts Hannibal's head and he peers into the windows of Will's soul, seeking the lights within. They have all been doused, and he knows it.

"You have retreated, Will. Another trauma response - not fear though. Resignation, I think. That is hardly better."

What is he waiting for? What signal does Will need to give to precipitate this end? Is there more to come? He doesn't think he can take more. It's always the same; confounding bewilderment, paralysing indecision, intangible yearning, sweltering fatigue… if he's already accepted this, can't Hannibal just kill him already?

Will leans in, reaching slowly, demonstrably not a threat, and lowers his hands into Hannibal's jacket pockets. Hannibal tenses, watching Will with nearly blank caution. The fingers of Will's right hand find the scalpel he suspected *(knew)* would be there. He wraps his fingers around the cold metal with a satisfied sigh and lifts out the slim tool, holding it up between them and tilting it so it can catch the jaundiced street light.

"I think you want to use this on me," Will whispers. "I think, as much as you enjoyed patching me up, you'd enjoy cutting into me more."

Hannibal's hand comes up to gently grip the wrist of the weaponized hand, not exerting pressure, but ready to do so should it become necessary. His voice holds curiosity and perhaps some faint trace of amusement, "Is this about what I want? Or about what you want?"

"I just want an end to this," a whisper borne on the night air.

"An end to what, Will?"

He doesn't answer. He's still looking at the blade. Is it life he wants free of? Or is it fear he's trying to escape? Certainly he's sick of being literally and figuratively stuck in the past.

The fingers wrapped around his wrist provide an unexpected sense of security, and his conviction deflates as Hannibal retrieves and re-pockets the scalpel. The hand on his wrist slides to his upper arm with a reassuring squeeze, and Will lets himself be led away.

They don't speak again until Hannibal has Will sitting at the kitchen table. "For the record," Hannibal announces as the tea brews, "I do not believe you truly wish for death."

The tea smells smoky, like a campfire in the woods; nostalgia butts its head against Will's heart. "Oh?"

"You vacillate between fear of death and weary expectation of it. If you truly wished for death, your true emotional reaction would lie between indifference and anticipation."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

Hannibal lifts the lid of the teapot and glances inside, swirls it once and leaves it to steep further. "Why did you come to Italy, Will?"

"I already told you. I was looking for a friend."

"You 'were' looking for a friend?"

"Am looking for a friend."

"To what end? His death? Your own? Another's?"

Rolling his eyes, Will huffs, "Why are you so convinced someone's got to die?"

"I would argue that is your conviction."

Fair point, he supposes. "Yeah, well, it's all moot now anyway. I never meant to end up here, and I can't find him like this."

"Like what?"

Will tugs at his hair. *Trapped in 1989 goddamnit!* Christ, it's so annoying not being able to talk about it. "It doesn't matter. Like I said, he's fundamentally inaccessible. Literally."

"Already dead?" It is said blithely, without expectation of this being the case, merely questioning the reasoning behind such an adamant statement.

"No," Will quirks his lips. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

This draws a sliver of amusement from Hannibal, who takes a moment to pour the tea. "Lapsang souchong," he informs, passing the white china cup to him.

"Thank you."

"How is he the opposite of dead? Has he been reborn? Joined the church perhaps?" It's a good explanation. By offering it, Hannibal is robbing him of its credibility.

"Let's say, he has a new lease at life," Will picks instead, and Hannibal tips his head in concession, amused tension in his facial muscles. An absurd impression that Hannibal somehow *knows* rears its head, but no rational person would ever seriously consider such a fantastical concept.

He blows on the steaming liquid in the delicate cup and takes a small sip. The tea is like whiskey with a different kind of burn, smoky and peaty, spreading thermal heat rather than the chemical glow of ethanol. Maybe if he stockpiles some of this he can stop himself following his father into the bottle.

"How do you imagine your future, Will?"

"What… why?" Suspicion seasoning his response.

"It is harder to invite death if you can envisage a future."

"Oh I can 'envisage a future' alright. It's just not a very happy one."

"Are you sure it's your future you're thinking of?"

Will's eyes flick up to meet Hannibal's in a glare. "As opposed to?"

"Your past."

The soft drum of Will's pulse grows louder in his ears. Has he been so indiscrete? Is it possible that Hannibal has somehow guessed Will's strange story? Hannibal sips his tea with perfect composure, face unlined, eyes just as fathomless.

"What- what do you mean?"

"Our perception of the future is always coloured by the past. It is a challenge to any imagination to predict an unfamiliar outcome."

Right. Right. Not because he's popped over from the next millennium.

“When have you been at your happiest, Will?”

“I guess, when I was with my dogs. And… sometimes, with my friend.”

“Canine companionship has many merits. It is interesting to share experiences with such an alien consciousness, without any true understanding of how or what they think. Humans are quite different of course, and yet exactly the same in that respect. It is merely harder to remember that the true nature of another’s thoughts are beyond us.”

The tea has cooled enough that he can take a greedier draught of it. “My problem generally lies in seeing too far into other people. In fact, the advantage of my friend was that I couldn’t really read him at all. Much like the dogs, I suppose.”

“And did you find the same satisfaction in him as you did your dogs?”

This produces a chuckle from Will’s chest. “Hardly. No, with dogs I guess I see what I want to see. With…” *shit,* he nearly said ‘Hannibal’, “*my friend*, I see what he wants me to see.”

“He sculpts his persona, but is that not what we all do?”

“Oh sure, to a degree,” he emphasises the last syllable with a dash of acid. “But, he… elevates it to an art form.”

“Is that admiration in your tone?”

“I’d have to be a very small person not to acknowledge the skill it takes.”

“Bitterness too, I see.”

“Oh yes. Despite my best efforts… I choke on it sometimes.” He coughs a laugh that sounds suspiciously like the strangling he alludes to.

There’s a discreetly placed pause, then, “You mentioned a transformation?”

“Mmm.” Will rubs his eyes, “That’s a story for another night.” Hearing himself, he glances up. “Er, if… I mean… I don’t…” He flails mentally, and Hannibal takes pity on him.

“You are certainly the most interesting house guest I have had in some time. You are welcome to stay a few more nights.”

Swallowing and ducking his head, Will mumbles an awkward thanks. He bites his lip, rolling the fine bone china between his palms. “Why were you following the waiter tonight?”

Hannibal sucks on his own lip, eyeing Will’s bitten one. A blush rises onto Will’s cheek. “Your instinct told you I intended him harm. Perhaps I was merely observing, trying to find reason for the compassion you offered where I saw only cause for contempt.”

Two years is a long time to be influenced by Hannibal, it’s also a long time to familiarise oneself with his obfuscations and omissions. *“Perhaps* you were – but stalking a person to

try and understand them is a circuitous route to compassion."

"Is that not what you were doing when you followed me?"

He should have expected that. "I wasn't trying to feel compassion," his voice is tainted with the darkness that tarnishes his insides. When he fantasises about his 'reckoning', he pictures killing original Hannibal. For a moment he conjures the image of asphyxiating the one in front of him. He smooths the image away, telling himself he's just tired and cranky.

"What then?"

Stretching his neck, which obliges him with a small but gratifying crack, Will swallows the last of his tea and replaces it gently on the table. "I guess I wanted to see history repeat itself." Will wonders if he is now deliberately goading Hannibal. *Come on, figure it out you son of a bitch.*

"You believed I was hunting. Have you followed someone on a hunt before?"

"You could say that."

Hannibal smiles and drops his gaze to the table, his pale lashes lowered and visible against the dark eyes beneath.

"It is the strangest thing, Mr Graham, but I find there is something rather familiar about you, as though we have met before. But, I cannot place you in memory, *alors*, perhaps it is just your manner."

Suspecting the smile on his face looks as sickly as he feels, Will pushes out an unconvincing rasp of laughter. "I've definitely only been in Europe a week. And you've… never been to America?"

"Not yet."

"Well then. Guess it's just my 'manner'."

"That must be it."

From somewhere, a charge has built in the room. It crackles distractingly in the air around them, at the fringes of Will's central nervous system. Hannibal finishes his own tea, before examining the glossy curve of the white teacup. Will guesses what Hannibal is going to do a moment before his arm elegantly extends.

The teacup's descent to the tiled floor is somehow fixed in transparent treacle, the neat ear of its handle rotating innocently as it slowly tumbles into gravity's well. For all its suspended free-fall, the shock of its destruction no less jarring when it erupts into brittle uneven shards; they tinkle merrily in the wake of the initial concussion. The two men gaze at the gleaming ruins, winking as they settle below the kitchen bulbs.

"What do you know of entropy, Will?"

Will has gone cold. He knows all about teacups and time, and the association Hannibal keeps between the two. It almost feels as though Hannibal is trying to give him an opening to discuss his predicament, but that's impossible. As much as he longs to explore this with another mind, with Hannibal's incredible mind, confessing the truth of this situation to Hannibal sounds cataclysmically stupid.

"I know the teacup can't gather itself up again. I know it takes more 'work' to build something than to destroy it. The natural state of things is chaos, order takes energy to create, and to maintain."

Eyes still riveted on the broken porcelain, Hannibal replies with a distant voice. "Just so. And yet, if we draw back, is there not also a current that flows towards order?"

Wrinkling his brows at Hannibal, Will tries and fails to predict where this question is taking them. Hannibal gently weaves his fingers through the air, as though sampling the temperature of a bath, and elucidates his meaning.

"At the birth of the universe there was only energy and primitive subatomic particles. These joined to become the earliest and simplest atoms. These atoms gathered and condensed and burned as stars, fusing into more complex matter, eventually forming secondary star systems and vast clouds of dust, which spun into proto-planetary discs. The discs coalesced into planets, physics became chemistry, and out of the alchemists brew, self-perpetuating reactions: life. Life in turn grew more complex, developed consciousness. The universe found a way to experience itself." He pauses, looking up at Will, checking to see if Will is still following. He is, but Hannibal's lesson still eludes him. Hannibal sees this, and concludes, "Things fall apart, but the universe uses the pieces to build, evolve, increase in complexity."

Ah, this is all a flowery way to say you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Well, that may be, but what of the lost potential of the egg? "And what of the casualties that fall to the wayside in that journey? Do they mean nothing?"

"Consider this: it is not time that moves, it is we who move in time. Because of the nature of space-time, a photon, travelling at the speed of light does not experience time. Its journey from the heart of a star, across light years to our retinae, would be instantaneous. To us, it is a particle and a wave, travelling from point A to point B, but if it were able to perceive itself, it would not be in motion, but a single bright spear, stretching between star-birth and eye-death."

Will blinks rapidly, taking the information in. It's been over a decade since he read *A Brief History of Time*, but the information rings the same disconcerting notes.

"The teacup is still in one piece. Just not here."

"Exactly."

Sagging in his seat, Will catches sight of the clock; it's approaching two in the morning. "That's fascinating… but, I'm not entirely sure how that's supposed to help me."

“If time exists as a continuous whole, then nothing is truly lost. Everything we do is fixed in eternity, but we perceive ourselves as a spark traveling a line, and not a bright spear.”

Grunting, Will casts Hannibal a sceptical look. Great, everyone else gets to be a spear. Will is an ouroboros, circling around and eating himself from behind. He rubs at his arid eyes. “Wouldn’t have thought you’d believe in fate.”

“Fate? No. Our minds are more four-dimensional than our bodies. Our bodies shed and replace dying cells at every moment. But our consciousnesses persist in a continuum through the sequence of moments we perceive. Just because the true reality of physics is beyond our complete comprehension, does not mean we are robbed of our choices.”

“Is that enough for you then? Does it comfort you to know the lost treasures of your past still exist, imperceptible but permanent?”

This question has Hannibal’s own darkness penetrating his shields. “It brings me some consolation,” a raw note to his voice, “but, to call it ‘enough’ might be oversimplification.”

“Mmm.” Will looks down at the white rubble on the floor. “The dispassion afforded by metaphysical perspective is small solace.”

“Where do you find solace, Will?” The quality, which had robbed Hannibal’s trim shoulders of their credibility when first seen in the Uffizi, returns: vulnerability. It’s out of place on the impenetrable features, and achingly endearing.

He opens his mouth to answer, and has no words. Once, he might have talked about his stream, but Hannibal had diverted the river, cut a new path for it, and it had flowed out of Will and onto the Baltimore kitchen floor. There was no comfort to be found there anymore.

Honestly, when he needs soothing, he turns to Hannibal. When he wants to torture himself, he turns to Hannibal. He imagines sitting across from him in the leather chairs, Hannibal spinning little webs of warped wisdom between them. Or he pictures pounding at his face with bleeding fists, as he had with Randall Tier, the bright eyes still triumphant as Will delivers his violence. Or he remembers the glistening hurt and reproach in them as Hannibal let him slide to the kitchen floor, and as he cut Abigail’s throat.

Will had deliberately crossed an ocean to find him; accidentally crossed time and found him.

He can’t say any of this to Hannibal, of course, but perhaps some of his own vulnerability shows on his face, because the other man offers a small smile of camaraderie, and offers him an out.

“Some try to find solace in God. Do you believe in a god?”

“No. Not in any… conventional sense.”

Hannibal stands and pushes his chair back in, lifting it slightly so it doesn’t scrape the tiles. He goes to cupboard and finds a dustpan and brush, and sweeps the shattered remains of

china from the floor. “I too would never presume to claim knowledge of what such a being might be like, what its intentions might be. Certainly, it is not as benevolent as many would have us believe. Just this March, in Pavia – a city North of here – a cathedral bell tower collapsed. Torre Civica: two hundred and fifty-five feet of brick, slewing from the heavens. Three people died, the cathedral itself was mostly undamaged.” Disposing of the delicate rubble, he washes his hands and dries them on a tea towel.

A familiar story, a familiar conversation; he skips the line he used last time, and steals from Hannibal’s script instead. “And you think this made God feel powerful.”

“If he exists, he is powerful by definition. I think it amused him.”

Bastard’s got an answer for everything. “Hmm. Not much solace to be found in that thought either.”

Leaning back against the counter, Hannibal muses, “Why do people like to imagine there is a God? What ache does the thought soothe?”

Scratching at the nape of his neck, Will sighs. “They want to be loved, listened to, understood. Forgiven for being stupid and weak.”

“And they think only an idealised concept is capable of granting this?”

Bells ring in the back of Will’s mind. “Even atheists do that though, crave the imago of their subconscious.”

“Ah yes, the idealised version of a loved one, carried with us throughout life. It seems we are all capable of being as cruel as God.”

Rolling his shoulders, feeling his bruises pull, Will gives squint of confusion. “How do you mean?”

“Whether a god or an imago, how difficult it must be for the heart to notice reality’s paltry offerings, when a fabricated ideal is already stitched in place.” He stretches off from the counter and passes Will, running a hand across his shoulders. “Get some sleep, Will, if you can.” He pauses in the doorway. “I will be going for another jog in the morning. If you do not wish to be left alone, you need not follow behind; you can run at my side.”

The words send a jolt down his spine, gooseflesh rippling out across from his skin, and then Hannibal is gone, leaving him in the kitchen to steep like the tea in his belly.

Chapter End Notes

*The cathedral bell tower collapse in Pavia is a true story, not quite a church roof but close enough, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-03-18-mn-119-story.html

And uh, sorry if the conversation at the end gets a bit too involved... I think that's the most 'physics-y' conversation in this story, although there's a few more chats on 'time' as the boys muddle through this strange conundrum!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Publishing this one a bit early, 'cause I have to write a talk on biotechnology tomorrow, and can't be procrastinating!

Thank you all for your patience so far, I know this is quite the slow burn, but things are beginning to heat up...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He dreams he is on the floor of a rowing boat, stretched out and lazy in the sun. Hannibal is there too, the original Hannibal; broad of shoulder, skin looser on his face, flecks of grey in his perfectly groomed hair. Unlike Will, he is sitting upright on one of the painted wooden benches, leaning his weight on the gunwale of the boat, observing the reclining figure.

"Are you quite comfortable there?" The question sounds bored in his mouth.

"Very." The word drifts up from languid lips.

"This is your ideal, is it?" Hannibal looks out across the horizon, "You can't even see the sea."

It's true, all Will can see is the sky, the sides of the boat, and Hannibal. It's better this way. From the bottom of the boat, he can have Hannibal without context. It is the context that makes him objectionable. On his own, Will rather likes him.

"I don't need to see it. I'm floating on it."

"I'm sorry," his imago says, "But that's not enough for me."

He produces a knife, not the thin scalpel he normally prefers, but a large bowie knife, and drives it into the floor between his feet. Water immediately begins to pool around the sunken blade, and when Hannibal yanks it free of the wood, a coy fountain springs to life, salt water spurting up to claim and fill the little vessel.

Hannibal and Will regard each other as the boat sinks; Hannibal calm and satisfied, Will glowering with resentment, but stubbornly continuing to recline as the water rises around him, lapping up at his hair, his ears, his cheeks. Only when it reaches his eyes and nostrils does he begin to panic. His clear picture of Hannibal wavers, stinging water distorting the

image, and the saline sea rushes in to invade his sinuses, his lungs. He thrashes, but can't sit up; Hannibal's gaze pins him in place.

Will sinks until the ceiling of refracted sunlight is far from reach. The boat has gone from beneath him, and he is now hanging suspended in deep dark cold water. He flounders, unable to claw his way upwards, the last bubbles of air gusting out of his mouth, organs heavy with the weight of water pressing in on them.

Hannibal swims close, and now that they're both underwater, he can see him clearly again. Hannibal is young now, and with the wide empty ocean all around, blue and black in every direction, Will clutches to him desperately, holds him close, holds him tight.

It slowly dawns on him, that despite the water filling lungs, he hasn't drowned, hasn't died. He's still alive.

Pulling back he looks at the early iteration of the man who has consumed his mind. His hair floats in silky strands around a face that is unlined but creased with amusement, his arms gripping him in turn. Will smiles at him, blinking in a dawning epiphany. He leans in, and their lips meet, fire flickering through his body as Hannibal's tongue licks into his mouth, and-

Jerking awake with a start, Will's mind gallops with his pulse. He thinks the front door might have shut. The lines of light through the shutter cracks are milkier than the previous morning, and further to the left: it's earlier than the previous day. The sound was likely Hannibal leaving for his jog. Instead of panic at being alone, Will feels relieved. Perhaps it is the forewarning he received, or perhaps it is the acute awareness of his mortifying physical condition.

Will grips the bed sheets and can't honestly remember the last time he woke with this issue; certainly not since being eviscerated, and probably not since before the encephalitis. Some medical practitioners would probably call this progress. He's not so sure that this is the result of natural testosterone fluctuations, this seems directly related to his dream.

He is uncertain what to do. Moral dignity would suggest he grit his teeth and wait for this to pass. It's not polite to whack off in someone's guest bedroom, especially if that person has an acute sense of smell. It's also not okay to indulge the cravings he suddenly has for his… *friend.*

The craving is there though, he can no longer deny that. This is a bright clear bugle call cutting through his self-deception. Masturbation in recent months has been an unsatisfying exercise in self-flagellation; frustrating, hollow, a little painful. A moment of release, quickly followed by shame.

Meeting Hannibal's warm soft lips, wrapped in the water and wrapped in his arms, sinking into darkness… the impressions left by the dream flood him with a heat that is gentle and lulling, enticing with promises of a slow aching build to arching pleasure.

Will levers himself out of bed, hoping to the cruel fates that Hannibal has indeed left the flat, and steals into the bathroom without detection. He locks the door, acutely aware of the soft silk of his pyjama bottoms sliding over sensitive skin. The shower occupies one side of the compact room with transparent doors to seal the space from its spray. The silk pants fall away, and he steps down into the sunken floor and closes the partition behind him.

The water is cold when it hits him, but even this doesn't deter the physical anticipation. The cascade warms quickly, and when the temperature melts the tension from his bones, he takes himself in hand. His erection fits gratefully into his palm, immediately swelling further, pleasure crawling up his spine in a way that has become unfamiliar.

The seductive voices had whispered a slow build, but his movements are quickly overtaken by a howling need. The images that flash behind his lids leave no room for further dishonesty, there's only one person in the shower with him... and when he clenches around the deep bolt of pleasure and silently cries out, it's his name that soundlessly rides forth.

The water washes it all away, and he braces the heels of his hand against the tiled wall, trembling under the purifying spray.

Dried and dressed and in the kitchen, Will is engaged in a battle of wits with the antiquated coffee machine when the front door opens to admit the fresh sweat and strange exuberance of early-morning Hannibal. He strides in with Walkman and a paper bag, grins when he catches sight of Will. "I thought I smelled coffee."

"I haven't quite figured her out yet," Will confesses, wondering how a coffee machine can be more mentally taxing than a boat engine.

"Allow me." Placing bag and analogue technology on the table, Hannibal steps into Will's space, and Will doesn't immediately retreat. Heat radiates from the freshly worked muscles, the smell coming off him is vibrant and healthy, and it's not long before Will's nerves fail him and he takes a self-conscious step back.

He gives his mind over to following Hannibal's deft movements with the finicky machine, then its pieces come together in his mind and he gives a rumble of comprehension.

"That will start filling the pot in a moment," Hannibal concludes, stepping back to the bag on the table, from which he lifts bread, a carton of eggs and some spinach before half crumpling the bag in his fist and walking to the doorway. "I'll rejoin you presently, and we can make breakfast." He favours Will with a warm smile, as bright and soft as the early sun spilling through the windows, and he's gone again.

Will imagines Hannibal's body occupying the same space where he had been standing hard and naked not an hour ago, and a flush rises to his cheeks. He gets the coffee and two cylindrical glass mugs set out on the table, his own filled and nearly empty again by the time Hannibal comes back, smelling of the same shampoo, comfortable and loose after his run and shower.

The collective noun may have been used when breakfast was first mentioned, but Hannibal waves him away when he offers to help. He goes on to create Eggs Benedict, presented over prosciutto on fresh ciabatta bread, crisp spinach drizzled in a sweet balsamic vinegar on the side. Will offers an open face of appreciation before advancing on his breakfast. The yolks spill yellow across the parma ham and crusty bread, and he tastes paprika and nutmeg in the creamy sauce.

Will's hum of enjoyment borders on salacious, and he feels colour return to his cheeks again. Christ, what is wrong with him? This is monumentally inappropriate and utterly inconvenient.

The chef seems happy enough with the reaction, tucking into his own breakfast with an aura of accomplishment. "What are your plans for tomorrow, Will?"

The easy tranquillity that had settled about Will's shoulders, a mantle of mindfulness, falls away. Is Hannibal kicking him out? He makes sure to keep as much from his face as possible. "Why? What's tomorrow?"

"Monday." Hannibal offers a quirk of his lips.

"Oh, so you'll be…"

"In class all day, yes."

"Right." He clears his throat, then fills his mouth with spinach leaves, chews slowly as he thinks what a normal person might do in his supposed situation. "I guess I'll see about trying to get myself… sorted out. Go to the embassy."

The disappointment doesn't quite make it to Hannibal's face, but some of his appetite seems to fade. "How silly of me. We should have done that yesterday, I could have helped you. No administrative buildings will be open today of course."

"No."

"Although some shops might be, if you would like to get yourself some things?"

"I have no money."

"No matter, I have resources. You can pay me back when you re-establish contact with your bank."

"Yeah," Will draws out the word. "I'd rather not. Call it a… cultural thing if you like."

"You're more comfortable 'borrowing' my clothes?"

This drives a wince to Will's face. "I'm not altogether comfy with that either."

"Your own clothes are drying in the utility room. They're somewhat the worse for wear, I'm afraid. I couldn't get all the blood from your shirt, and the sides of your trousers are a little scuffed up."

"Thanks. I… I'm sure they'll do fine." At Hannibal's dubious expression he adds, "I'll take a look after breakfast."

Inclining his head politely, Hannibal resumes his own meal, but is unable to resist pointing out another argument for Will's continued dependence. "I have found, in my own personal dealings, that officials are a great deal more inclined to help those who present themselves as wealthy, upstanding citizens."

"Hah," Will's laugh is caustic. "Yeah, guess I've noticed that too. You're generally better at appearing to conform than I am."

"I just wear a suit."

"Yeah, a person-suit."

Hannibal's mouth tugs up at the corners, and his next forkful is brought up to a delighted face. His eyes gleam as he chews unabashedly. "This is something that bothers you about your friend too, is it not? That he only shows parts of himself?"

"Yeah."

A gentle rocking nod, "Is it so different to what you do? What most of us do? Lubricate the cogs of social interaction by displaying the facets of ourselves that are most likely to be well received? Or in your case, keep others at bay."

"Ouch," Will grumbles, batting his eyes and putting a hand to his chest in a mockery of offence. "Am I so prickly?"

"You don't want people to like you. But as I seem to like you anyway, you've let me in. For which I am grateful."

"I can't imagine why." Will scoffs, with genuine incredulity. It's always mystified him. Sure, psychologists and psychiatrists have always wanted to poke their fingers into the pores of his absorbent little mind, but Hannibal's enduring fascination continues to baffle.

"There's a different quality to you. Ionising, the way a lightning strikes changes the air after a storm; vivid, the first dash of sea-spray when you find the ocean's edge."

Will's jaw slackens. The sentiments unfurl like great snapping sails, driving the craft of Will's infatuation into deeper waters. Hannibal's eyes drop to the parted lips and hunger blossoms behind his eyes, the orbs bright in their statuesque casing. A fluttering sensation in Will's stomach signals the flight of his appetite. How the hell does Hannibal *say* things like that? Right now Will has lost the ability to speak altogether, much less casually wax poetic compliments. "I… have no idea what to say to that," is the best he can come up with - it's honest at least.

"A response is not required. I merely ask that you indulge my linguistic whimsy."

Will laughs, freer than the surprised chuckles which have previously pleased Hannibal. He gets a proper grin in response. It looks almost goofy on Hannibal's younger face, and Will

laughs a little longer than he might have otherwise, a pulse of tenderness in his chest.

Once again, Hannibal successfully draws Will from the flat, falling quickly into his tour guide persona, gesturing expansively at the gates of the old city as he recounts tales of sieges, and the stories of the artists and architects behind the sweeping bridges, before leading them back to the Uffizi Gallery. As they walk its halls and Hannibal affords Will the chance to properly take in the many unique cultural wonders within, his eloquent and knowledgeable observations on each piece gradually attract a small group of followers. He obligingly raises his voice for the curious stragglers on, but his eyes are only for Will and the art.

They stop for lunch in another square; this one has nothing in its centre, so all attention is drawn to the marble fronted basilica at its end, for which the plaza is named. To one side of the basilica is a statue of a stern looking Dante Alighieri, which Hannibal tells him was sculpted by an Enrico Pazzi. Will smothers any expression that might try to escape and casually comments that this seems to be a common surname in Florence.

Their order is taken and their food delivered. The waiting-staff remain cordial enough to stay off Hannibal's radar, and Will manages to stay the course. Their conversation keeps him engaged, and having made him chuckle a few times over the past forty-eight hours, Hannibal seems to have honed the technique. He keeps Will smiling and laughing, and even the 80s fashion and technology become less jarring. It's just like being in another country really.

There is one point a cloud passes over his thoughts, chilling his mood. He imagines being in Florence with Hannibal, just like this, but in 2016, with Abigail at their side. Happy and free and alive. He could have had that. If he hadn't played the games. If Hannibal had…

He forces his mind away. It's a different world, a different life. It might never even happen now.

"You talked about time last night," Will remarks, as the waiter places their espressos onto the white linen tablecloth.

"I did." Hannibal waits for Will to continue, eyes alight with renewed interest.

"And fate, or, at least, the continuum of time."

"Yes."

"Does that mean you only believe in one version of events? Or, do you think there might be, um, multiple variations?"

"Parallel dimensions? A multiverse?"

"Yeah. That sort of thing."

Hannibal peers into the small cup of black liquid as he mulls this over, perhaps finding some inspiration in its dark surface. Instead of the grand soliloquy Will expects in response,

Hannibal smiles mysteriously and demures. “I can only say that the universe is likely much stranger than any of us can know.”

“Hedging your bets there a bit, aren’t you, Doctor?”

A slow blink at the honorific, then, “Science has not yet produced equipment capable of measuring such things. The maths has yet to lead to anything conclusive. I would resist latching onto a belief before obtaining evidence; it only inhibits the gathering of pertinent information.” He throws back his espresso with unconscious dignity and drama, and Will can’t help but smile, partly at the young man’s poise, and partly at the eventual delivery of the expected monologue.

Placing the miniature coffee cup back onto its correspondingly small saucer, eyes on the task, Hannibal adds, “Short of convincing mathematics or empirical evidence, I would have to travel to another time or dimension myself, or meet someone who had.” The gaze travels up to Will. “But that’s not very likely, is it?”

“How would we know?” Will deflects with airy nonchalance, quaffing his own shot of coffee, impressed at his own calm. Hannibal’s comment in the kitchen about Will’s ‘ionising’ effect strikes a different chord. Can Hannibal *smell* the time travel on him?

“I suppose we wouldn’t. Perhaps we’re constantly slipping into different universes and time lines, but the changes are so small we don’t notice.” A bright, breezy, fake smile appears on Hannibal’s face as he raises a hand casually to a passing waitress and requests the cheque.

The twin lacerations healing on his throat have grown itchy over the day, and while Hannibal’s eyes are occupied, Will grazes his fingernails over the area.

Hannibal’s eyes snap back to him. “Leave your wounds be, Will.”

Unbelievable, Will would scowl at him if he didn’t know he was right, and even then that usually wouldn’t stop a glower. Instead, he has to repress a small smile at the audacity.

The chastisement and Will’s response to it barely register, Hannibal is already rising and throwing the cape of his tour guide persona around his shoulders. “Have you heard of the Boboli Gardens? No? Well the Medici family…”

Will listens with half an ear, swept up in Hannibal’s wake as he is towed to their next destination. If he’s distracted by Hannibal’s neck and shoulders as he walks slightly behind the other man, it’s only because he’s comparing the two versions of him. If he stares at the man’s arms, it’s only because of the graceful gesticulations as he points at a set of church doors and discusses their arches. If he’s watching the man more than the city, it’s only because he’s indulging Hannibal’s desire for an attentive audience… and not at all because the atmosphere of this morning’s dream has settled low in his belly, a warm secret to be hidden and hoarded behind the fibrous scar tissue of his smile.

Chapter End Notes

Aw, what a lovely day the boys are having... but Will shouldn't get too comfortable, confrontations and revelations are inevitable, after all. (` ∀ ´)Ψ

It all starts to unravel next chapter, then there're 2 meaty chapters and an epilogue.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The afternoon sun filters down through trees onto statues and sculptures, throwing itself more unreservedly across fountains and closely manicured lawns of vibrant green. The pair stay in the Boboli gardens until the sun's focus moves on to other pastures, leaving only the afterglow of its attention. Will might have received a little too much of its notice, actually; he feels a little giddy.

They return to Hannibal's apartment and he is settled on the balcony with a glass of wine while his host prepares dinner. He's pleasantly exhausted, filled with a warm buzzing honey, and - as acutely saccharine as the thought tastes - Will must admit it's been a lovely day.

Hannibal serves them out on the balcony, music and light floating out through the glass doors. Cutting into the meat, Will wonders with conspicuous absence of emotion whether the animal they're eating had a name, a profession, a deficit in manners. The bats come out, swift shadows that swallow mosquitoes from the night air.

With dinner cleared away they return to the balcony with coffee and some small biscotti. From an open window in one of the neighbouring flats, the cries of a couple copulating briefly join the strains of the string quartet, and Will can't help but snicker as he catches the vaguely perturbed expression on Hannibal's refined features.

"Surely you're not a puritan, Hannibal?" he teases.

Catching some of Will's mirth, Hannibal schools his features into an expression of mock severity. "I assure you, Will, were you personally acquainted with Senor and Senora Varriale, those sounds might drive you to celibacy."

Will doesn't mention that he's been 'celibate' most of his life; it seems like a dangerous tangent. Instead, he quizzes Hannibal on Paris, and – keeping his expression idly interested – takes careful note of what he does, and doesn't, say.

His boarding school seems to be the topic Hannibal is most willing to explore, along with his impressions of the city itself - a true marvel to a boy who had only ever grown up 'in the country', as he put it. After some more demonstrations of his linguistic whimsy, describing the architecture and parks of the French capital, and fondly recalling a personal culinary renaissance, Will innocently probes the edges of the blank spaces.

"Who did you live with in school holidays?"

"My uncle and his wife."

"Did they have any kids?"

Adjusting the angle of the teaspoon that sits in a little dish beside the cream, the young man affects disinterest. “No. But my uncle’s wife had a serving girl, a little younger than me.”

“A serving girl?” Will doesn’t want to sound judgmental, but having met Chiyoh, the label rankles.

“An ‘attendant’ really. I assure you, it was not child labour, they were very close. Her mother was a pregnant refugee the Lady Murasaki took on as staff to provide her with shelter, but she died giving birth. My uncle wouldn’t hear of the infant being a recognised ward, so she was raised by them and given an education, with the understanding her social position was to be considered no higher than a servant. She had no other family or prospects.” His lips twist. “I think he may have come to regret that, in his later years. She proved to be very bright and resourceful, with an impeccable moral code, but remained as cold towards him as…” He cuts himself off, conscious perhaps that the inner monologue of his reminiscing is, in this instance, an outer monologue with an audience. “Well.”

Hannibal brings the coffee to his lips, throat undulating as he swallows, eyes roaming the dark courtyard through the balcony bars.

Scales waver around a tipping point; interrogations are a delicate balance. You must supply the right amount of sympathy, disinterest, understanding, silence and prompting. Will senses, if he is to get anything more out of Hannibal in this conversation, it will be with prompting – but the line between prompting and pushing is almost indistinguishable, especially with Hannibal.

Powerless to stop himself, but with gentleness in his voice, he makes his choice. “You said you have no family left. What happened to your uncle and aunt?”

A faint grimace ripples Hannibal’s mask, but he levels Will with a look of fond reproach, a challenge ringing in the set of his mouth. “If I am to answer all these questions, do you intend to reciprocate in kind?”

Will chuckles cynically. “Getting to know you always seems to involve some aspect of truth or dare.”

Leaning forward slightly, lids lowering provocatively, “I was thinking *quid pro quo*, but I’ll admit I like the addition of a ‘dare’.”

“Quid pro quo, then,” Will says with a roll of his eyes. “Fine. Answer the question, then you can have a turn.”

Hannibal forms a small moue of his lips, and sits back to consider the night sky, too bright with Florence’s lights to show any stars. “My uncle experienced coronary failure, unexpectedly. His wife took her own life some months later.”

“And the ‘attendant’?”

His question earns him a raised brow. “A follow up question, I trust I will be allowed one?”

“I promise to be as forthright with my answers as you are being.”

Puffing with feigned indignation, “I am being honest.”

“Honest, and circumspect, yes, I know.”

A chuckle from the other man. “The attendant has a ward of her own now.” He says with a little smile, as though she had adopted a child; it’s incongruous with the reality of the situation, but fitting for Hannibal’s perception of the world.

Only a few days ago, from Will’s perspective, he had freed Chiyoh from years of a self imposed moral obligation. A numbing monotony of endless days spent keeping herself and her prisoner alive - and that was all you could really say for either of them: they were alive. How strange to think that here, she has only recently embarked on her career as prison warden.

“And now I believe it is my turn.” The slender figure leans forward again, the intense satisfaction on his features the Hannibal equivalent to rubbing his hands together in glee.

Will’s hand goes to his scar on his belly, hoping he’s up to the task of crafting omission laced half-truths. "Go ahead."

“What was the nature of this transformation this friend of yours was half-way through effecting upon you?”

The groan that grinds out of Will is a decent approximation of Senor Varriale’s earlier grunts, but inspired by much less pleasant stimuli. He rolls some of the hard biscotti crumbs under the pad of his index finger. “He had an ideal of me, I suppose he was trying to twist me to fit that shape.”

Hannibal waits patiently, but when Will doesn’t continue, he spreads his hands. “I’m afraid Will, that while we don’t have an impartial referee, I must rule that answer as too elusive to pass as adequate recompense.”

Scratching harshly at his stubble Will nods and stretches his jaw. “Yeah. Fine. Right. Um.” He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. He mustn’t talk *around* it as an avoidance tactic, he doesn’t want to give Hannibal any more clues than he has already. He has to be very precise about what information he can allow his adversary’s younger self to possess. He focused on the wording of the question.

“The change was moralistic, in nature.” Will offers, it answers the direct question, but Hannibal’s dark eyes hold him mercilessly, expecting more still, adamant. “In his company I was becoming less attached to the values that had previously defined my behaviour.” The gaze is steady and unrelenting. “He stripped away everything that was important to me.” Will’s voice is husky now. “Then left without putting anything in its place.”

There - that has to be enough, and thankfully, it is. Hannibal drops his gaze and nods appreciatively, absorbing this information. Will exhales a silent peal of air, relieved that the ordeal is over, but unclear on whether he had revealed too much.

"My second question-"

"Oh God damn it," Will mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Quid pro quo, Will. I'll do you the mercy of making this a question with a binary answer. Are you hoping to find your friend so that you may undo this transformation, or complete it?"

Some 'mercy'. Will exhales lengthily. "I feel you're strikes have been more surgical than mine, Doctor."

"I'm willing to go under the blade again, if you are."

"I'm not sure I could survive another operation."

Long fingers steeple together. "You have yet to come round from this one."

"Mmm," Will huffs, peering into his coffee cup to remind himself that it is empty. "I think the formulation of this answer might require a catalyst."

"Say, single malt Scotch?"

His eyebrows rise in appreciation, despite the blatant angling on his part. "That… would do nicely, thank you."

He is left alone with the million-dollar question: reject or become. He'd like more time to formulate an answer, but he supposes this has been the question occupying the back of his mind for months now. Obligation and moral duty versus freedom and honest desire; but what would that freedom taste like? Would it be sweet and heady, or would barbs of guilt taint it, as his current morality is tainted by thorny darkness? Perhaps he just wants an end to the duality, whichever one wins can claim his body, he is sick of the battle.

When he comes back, he asks Hannibal, "Is it better to be objectively moral, or morally objectionable?"

"From the view point of the moralistic I presume? The language you used is steeped in bias. I do hope you are not trying to wheedle your way out of answering, Mr Graham?" The word 'wheedle' sounds exotic on Hannibal's tongue.

"Not at all." He sighs. "Just making conversation until the cogs are lubricated." He accepts the glass tumbler of burnished liquid and holds it up to meet its twin. Hannibal knocks their glasses together, "*Slàinte*."

The whiskey slides down his throat in a spreading pool of liquid fire, fumes licking up into his sinuses with a welcome burn. "Oh *gods*," Will breathes, "that's amazing."

"Talisker, a distillery on the Isle of Skye, off Scotland's West Coast."

It complements the tea they had last night almost perfectly. “They must be distilling wood smoke,” he rumbles appreciatively, taking another tiny sip, just enough to coat his tongue with. It tingles on his lips when he licks them.

Instead of responding, Hannibal unleashes his insistent stare once again, and Will buries his nose in his glass while he thinks, closing his eyes and letting the spirit move through him. “I want to complete the transformation. I just, can’t accept what that will make me.”

“You are an oxymoron, Will Graham.”

A surprised and self-deprecating laugh. “Well, I’ve definitely been called a moron before, but…” he trails off, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes. He had hoped the confession would free him, or fill him with a sense of power, but instead all he feels is shame. This version of Hannibal is not the one who needs to hear those words. Or… maybe those words, ‘*I want to complete the transformation’,* will continue to ring in Hannibal’s head as his knife cuts through Will’s abdomen, carefully sparing each organ in its violent passage.

He raises his eyes to meet the same dark eyes, and it hits him again how hopelessly interlinked they are now; how… if this *has* always been Hannibal’s past, his actions now make so much more sense. He has just given Hannibal every justification for messing with his life. The smugness, the implied *you know you want this really* … all because Will had just confessed the damning truth here on a balcony in Florence in 1989.

He wants to cut out is own tongue. He wants a do-over. Can he be sent back into the past again please?

“The thing is…” he blurts, “what I really wish is that he had never come into my life. That he had never started *contorting* me. He should have just left me alone, found someone else to… manipulate. He shouldn’t have been willing to put me through that much *pain*.”

Hannibal blinks at the vehemence of the unexpected outburst.

“And I shouldn’t forgive him.” Will blinks his tears away, keeping his hands rigidly away from his face. “I haven’t decided that I will.”

“Forgiving him is synonymous with completing your transformation.”

Will shakes his head, shrugs, then nods. “I think, maybe.”

“Accepting his actions and accepting your own. Do you believe man was created to battle himself?”

“My ancestors obviously evolved that way,” he snarks, thinking of his father’s numerous demons, then he growls, to distract from his exposed underbelly. “Anyway, you got two extra questions, it’s my turn I think.”

“I think you’ll find one of those was a statement you chose to comment on.”

Sucking his teeth and shaking his head, he finds his humour has a sharp edge to it; Hannibal up to his old tricks. Energy is building in him and he has nowhere to put it. They’ve

done so well, playing nicely all day; this conversation was foolhardy on Will's part.

"I'm growing bored with the rules of the game."

"We could dispense with games and talk candidly if you prefer?"

This seems like a low blow, a difficult one to recover from. Certainly impossible to accede to, and hardly mutually advantageous; Hannibal's secrets are, for once, less shocking than Will's. Besides, bar some specifics on his childhood trauma, Will already knows all of Hannibal's secrets. Knows more of them than Hannibal does, at present.

Will scratches an ear as he replies, the hint of a sneer in his tone, "I'm being as candid as I reasonably can."

Pouting down at the whiskey in hand, eyebrows arched in wry tolerance, Hannibal politely cedes the conversation. He finishes his drink and somehow changes the entire atmosphere on the balcony just by shifting posture and tone.

"Have you heard of Glass and Wilson's modern Opera, *Einstein on the Beach*?"

Lying on his bed fully dressed and fidgeting restlessly, Will sits bolt upright when he hears the latch on the apartment door click shut.

"Son of a bitch," he growls, stuffing his feet into his boots and flying from the room, making straight for the front door. One arm in his coat, he yanks the door open and finds himself chest to chest with Hannibal.

He stalls, caught in the bright beam of Hannibal's gaze, inches away and swallowed in the inscrutable scrutinous intensity. Ghost pain rips through his stomach and he takes a step backwards, clutching at the old wound, but at least managing not to make a noise.

A mischievous twinkle gathering in eyes that still haven't blinked, Hannibal cocks his head and asks, "Would you care to accompany me on another night-time stroll?"

Jaw muscles bunching with the clenching of his teeth, Will nods, trying to internally talk his pulse down. Hannibal waits, expression pleasant, and Will's angry stare narrows into a glare. "Sure, why not."

He trails the other man out of the building, still scowling at his back. Once outside, Hannibal closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath, then turns to Will with a conspiratorial smile. "As much as I dream of living in Florence during the Renaissance, I must confess I doubt my olfactory senses could have withstood the experience."

"All hail civilisation and the modern wonder of underground plumbing."

"Hail. Now, what are your expectations of this little jaunt?"

With a glance at the doors and windows around him, and sinking slightly deeper into his coat, Will shrugs. “Where were you going?”

“Just for some fresh air. I feel I might have exhausted my tour guide repertoire for the day. I’d rather let you lead on this one.”

Will tilts his head back in exasperation, stares up at the night sky, blank and without stars. “Let’s just walk,” he says, and strikes out, Hannibal immediately in step with him, eyes still locked on Will’s face – he can feel the gaze prickling against his skin.

“Be honest with yourself, Will, if you can’t be honest with me. Deep within each of us lies the motivations behind our actions, what tugged you from you bed chamber this evening?”

Snorting, Will corrects him, “No one says ‘bed chamber’, not since the 1800s.”

“A stunning illustration of evasion. Please, take a moment to consider the question – you needn’t share it with me, but try an honest dialogue with yourself.”

They walk for a while in the still night, without purpose or destination. Will leads them through the artificially lit crevices between buildings, and Hannibal strolls beside him, radiating patient contentment. Random direction carries them in eccentric circles until he hears the clop of hooves, and lets their echoes guide him. He picks up his pace, Hannibal lengthening his stride to match. Will catches fleeting glimpses of antlered shadows, but sees neither hide nor feather of his hallucinatory companion. They finally emerge from the labyrinthine passages by the river, and Will finds they have emerged by the bridge capped with statues. Will crosses the street to gaze up at the man with his crown and sheath of wheat, then looks over to meet the hollow gaze of his female companion.

“I met these two when I first arrived in Florence,” he informs Hannibal, who stands appreciating the sculptures in his own reverie.

His eyebrows rise in response. “Did you? Then Botticelli’s was not the first Primavera of Florence that you chanced upon.” Will obliges him with a quizzical eyebrow, and Hannibal gestures towards the female statue, “Spring.” The hand swings round to the statue in front of them, “Summer. Autumn and Winter are stationed on the other side of the river.”

Will nods, “A bridge between the seasons.”

“Which would make the Arno ‘Time’, I suppose.” Hannibal adds, gazing beyond the statue to the reflected lights on the water below.

“Man’s oldest enemy,” Will growls.

“Because it carries us towards death? Or because it does so slowly?”

“Hah. Little column A…” He finishes the sentiment with a tipping of his hand, one way and the other. “Come on.”

Will begins to walk again, this time crossing the river, making for the backs of Winter and Autumn, and the south bank of the Arno.

With the river below their feet, the vibration of its passage filling the air with a low susurration, it's easier to talk. "I wanted to follow you, because I wanted to see for myself, what you are."

"You wanted to follow behind, so you could observe without having to commit to a reaction. Without having to reveal your response. Denial is easier when you only have to fool yourself."

"I'm not in denial. If I was in denial I'd still be in my bedroom."

"Aren't you? You might as well be. You left the apartment, but not the mindset. You steer us without reference or intent, avoiding the drive that propelled you from your room, that had you crossing the Atlantic."

The breeze coming up the river is welcome after the closed tight passages of the Florentine streets. At the end of the bridge he turns them passed Autumn, to walk west along the river.

"I suppose you have an idea what this 'drive' is, do you?"

"I'm rather more interested to know your thoughts on the matter. Let us follow the line of your thought through. You wished to follow. Where did you imagine I would lead?"

Death. Blood. Ruin. Yes, I wanted to see it again, from a safe distance; a ghost in the fabric of reality, to know you without changing you, without the knowledge changing me.

He can't. He can't kill with Hannibal. Even if his bones are vibrating in their muscle sheaths as the midnight and lemon streets paint this timeless city in a shade of unreality. Even if he feels more awake out here under a dark sky than he does under the sun. Even if his blood is singing in his veins with ill purpose and portent and power.

He walks the broken paving stones of ancient roads, which have supported the feet of all manner of humanity, and he harbours no illusions that the sinners weighed more than the virtuous.

"I wanted to see you as you truly are."

Slowing his pace,"You don't believe I have been honest with you?"

"Honesty is not always synonymous with truth. I think there's a side of yourself you can't safely share, that I can't safely see."

"And yet, you still wish to see."

"Yes."

They have come to a stop. The road stretches on ahead, unbroken to the next bridge, houses of different statures standing along one side, the languid river beyond a low wall on the other.

In what could almost be a formal dance move, Hannibal takes a step forward and revolves a half turn to stand in front of him. He regards him solemnly, and places his hands on Will's shoulders, thumbs stroking out to rest against each other on his larynx, tenderly, with menace.

"I have come to enjoy your company, Will. *Mais c'est vrai*, your seeing would not be safe for either one of us. Knowing that, what are you willing to risk in witnessing the truth you seek?"

Maybe it's confronting a phobia. Will has killed twice now, three really, and mutilated two corpses after the fact. He has seen Hannibal's creations, has imagined killing them through Hannibal's eyes, has watched Mason receive Hannibal's 'treatment', but the only person he has directly seen him kill… is Abigail.

He doesn't directly answer Hannibal's question. What would he risk; what hasn't he already risked? "I *need* to see."

Sighing and looking down between them, Hannibal moves his fingers up to either side of Will's neck, as though checking his glands, checking his pulse. Will's heartbeat is steady, a little elevated perhaps, but he feels calm. Certitude is a rare enough feeling for Will, and as good as a stag; he will follow it while he has it.

When Hannibal brings his head back up, Will sees he has removed his mask and is showing the true depth behind his eyes, the fathomless, pitiless holes that reach back to the scorched centre of his soul. Will's breath catches in his throat; he has only ever seen through those open portals once before: '*We couldn't leave without you…'*

Hannibal flattens his palms at Will's neck, fingers sliding up into his hair, and he leans in to place a gentle kiss against his lips. The contact is warm, tangible, and brief. Will's brain stutters, and he is only just preparing to kiss back when Hannibal steps away with another sigh, raising his chin to look beyond Will's shoulder.

"Then follow me, from a distance that suits you," his voice is heavy with the possible ramifications of Will's request, "and I will show you your truth."

Chapter End Notes

They've been having a lovely little weekend of side-stepping difficult conversations. But if you can't find the right words, you've got to let your actions speak for you.

Thank you all or reading, and extra thanks and shooting stars for those of you who have taken the time to signal your enjoyment!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> This is where that 'graphic depictions of violence' warning comes in... you know, just incase you're somehow part of this fandom but still get disturbed by a bit of mild peril and casual mutilation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal stalks passed Will, back up-river, and Will sways on his feet, bringing his fingers to his lips. A single word has entered his brain without context or direction. *Never*... Never what? Never something.

Will's fingers push against his lips, mimicking the light pressure they had received moments before.

Had a kiss ever felt like that before? When had a kiss last landed like a stone in his heart, displacing and suspending blood with the impact? Or lifted the crushing ceiling of his existence to show him a brief glimpse of the sky?

Never.

Could he have ever imagined that Hannibal could kiss him so sweetly, while the unfettered glare of his true self blazed from his eyes?

No, never.

He spins to locate Hannibal's retreating figure, horrified at the prospect of losing sight of him. Only seconds have passed and Hannibal's stride has carried him no more than a few buildings down. He takes a deep breath, refocusing on the night and the course he has set them upon.

It should feel ridiculous, playing at following Hannibal, but it doesn't. He shouldn't be here in this time anyway, he's a voyeur from the future, and Hannibal's permission is apparently the final ingredient to complete this strange alchemical spell. He waits another few beats, and then prowls into motion, limbs feeling looser and muscles more elastic, energised.

Stuffing his fists into his pockets as he walks, his knuckles meet something hard and metallic, and it only takes his questing fingers seconds to identify a capped scalpel. Will half-trips over his feet, and stands still for a moment, pulling it out of his pocket to stare at stupidly. He tucks it back into his pocket, hurrying to make up his steps, perturbed by

Hannibal's arrogance, whether it lies in assuming Will might kill with him, or in giving Will the opportunity to stop him.

One after the other they pass the Palazzo Capone and cross back to the north side of the city. Trailing Hannibal this way is surreal, reminiscent of a dream; if he loses sight of him he'll always still be just visible walking away when Will turns that next corner.

Pausing at the entrance to a dimly lit square, Will watches as Hannibal crosses to stand in the shade of some ornamental trees. At the far end of the square, up a set of a stone steps, a large brick church stands with its door open, spilling light in a skewed rectangle down the grey slabs. Minutes pass, and Will becomes one with the wall, all his focus on the shadow Hannibal has made of himself. His eyes snap away as another figure enters the square, crossing the paving stones with an unhurried pace. The priest's eyes are on his shoes as they tread a routine path toward the church, passed the spot where Hannibal waits in preternatural stillness.

Will holds his breath. The priest passes unharmed and makes it two, three steps beyond the tree before the shadow detaches itself. One arm snakes around the man's throat, the other going to his mouth. Seven seconds later, the priest goes limp, and Hannibal drags him back into the shadows and props him against a tree. He spends a moment there, then strolls out into the open again, returning something to his pocket, and trotting up the stone steps to disappear into the church's interior.

Frowning, Will jogs to the tree overshadowing the priest, checks he's still breathing, and runs up the steps to stand at one side of the open door and peer in. He can only see an antechamber. He bites his lip and steps in, shutting and bolting the door behind him – a precaution to prevent any innocent souls who might wander in.

The door at the side of the antechamber leads into the wide lofty heights of the church, pews arranged in militant ranks for the devoted to prostrate themselves in orderly lines. The walls hold a king's ransom in gold. Squat candles flicker within red glass cups. The saints and the dejected son of god gaze mournfully down on the scene. Will gazes mournfully back.

Hearing footsteps, Will darts behind a curtained alcove, wincing as a loose paving stone clacks under his weight. The footsteps pause, then a gruff voice demands, "Gianni, sei tu?"

"Mi dispiace, Padre Venturi, Padre Cresci farà tardi," Hannibal's smooth voice rolls out of the arches, deepening on the last two words. He switches to English, "I would have come earlier, and spared him the headache, but plans must be flexible, after all."

"Who are you?" the priest asks in a thick accent, and Will can hear the anger shielding his fear, the sneer disguising the alarm.

"We met a long time ago, Padre Venturi. We were never well acquainted, for which I am grateful, but your memory lingered long in the halls of Šventasis Lauryno, and in the nightmares of its wards."

It's not enough to listen, Will has to *see*. The curtain rail extends to the wall, and he leans his face against cold stone and eases the material aside to find Hannibal, sans coat and with

rolled-up sleeves, now wearing brown leather gloves, advancing as Venturi backs towards the altar. The gaunt priest is nearly as leathery as Hannibal's gloves. Will had not seen the man's face before the terror had set in, so it is hard to know if his face usually holds such deep lines – but their arrangement suggests a life of fierce expressions.

"I do not know you."

"You might not remember me," Hannibal acknowledges humbly. "We never spoke. But then, I never spoke at all."

The father pauses on the steps that lead to the dais. "The mute."

"Ah, I suppose we both had our reputations."

"How are you here?" His voice is shaking now. "Why?"

"A friend recently asked me about fate. I don't subscribe to fate, or faith, but I do find a confluence of circumstances to be satisfying. When I discovered you were living in Florence, I decided to save you for an auspicious moment."

The priest's hooded eyes grow wide as Hannibal produces his scalpel, holding it up to catch the light. Some previously stalled instinct lurches to life, and the man throws himself back and up the stairs, getting the altar table between them. Venturi lets out a shrill cry when Hannibal vaults over it, crashing back against the tabernacle, as though wishing to join God in his small, golden box. The impact knocks one of the tall candlesticks off the table, and causes the others to rock precariously.

"Your god was generous with his flesh. Do you not find comfort in knowing you will follow his example? I hear you are a puritan of the strictest kind, and only sacramental wine has passed your lips. I expect your liver will be divine."

Will isn't sure at exactly what point his feet carried him out of the alcove and down the aisle but he finds himself mounting the first steps to the dais. Even now, Will cannot completely parse the clouded water churned up by his conflicting instincts.

When the fox hears the rabbit scream, he comes a-runnin', but not to help. Why will you come running?

A gavel at the back of his head strikes *should should should* into his skull, along with images of trying to pull Hannibal off the priest, or stealing up behind him and using the unsolicited scalpel in his pocket to end him. *End him now*.

His hesitation speaks louder than the voices in his head, and rising from the depths of his nervous system is a low rumbling growl. Part of him salivates with curiosity, mesmerised, watching Il Monstro, the fledgling Ripper, close on his prey. *This is history, in the making.*

His body reacts as though listening to the opening chords of an orchestra, living sound swelling into existence around them, pulling goosebumps from his flesh. His skin vibrates with its own high frequency, contributing to the score of the stones under their feet, the bass

jewelled crucifixes, the horns in the soaring arches, the shrieking violins of the priest's fear, and the single transcendent note of Hannibal's knife.

Midway up the steps, Will freezes as Hannibal raises his arm. The arm comes down and across and up again. Hannibal's back obscures the cuts as they're made, but the crimson spray of blood across the gold tabernacle is vivid. Will echoes the shock of air huffed from the priest's lungs, flinching with each purposeful stroke, pulse igniting into a sustained roar. For a moment he is on the dais being cut into; then he is on the dais cutting.

But no, he is on the steps, shaking and uninjured, and that wet slap is someone else's viscera splashing to the floor. Will's scalp prickles, his breathing is uneven, but he is solid on his feet, made of something unassailable.

The priest gurgles as he tries to fall to the floor, but Hannibal holds him up and spins to heft the partially emptied preacher onto the altar table, more intestine unlooping and coiling to the floor. Venturi gapes like a fish, mouth flashing open and shut, open and shut, eyes bulging, already in shock. Hannibal looms over him, a few errant strands of hair detaching to fall across the speculative gaze with which he regards his victim, acting for all the world as though Will is the invisible spectator he wishes to be.

Hannibal hums musingly and turns to the tabernacle table with its golden candlesticks, picks two of them up and hefts them experimentally. He returns with them, placing them on either side of the man's head. He checks his left glove for blood, and finding it clean, reaches into a trouser pocket to extract a roll of transparent plastic bags. He removes the first one, and reaching inside it with the hand holding the scalpel, pierces the bag, twists it around the hilt, and continues to hold the knife from within the plastic sheath.

"Successful religions make use of excessive symbology and evocative imagery," he informs the dying man. "Let us follow their lead. First, the symbology. You believed your purpose was to purify, and so I shall remove your liver and kidneys. Your heart, however, was sorely lacking from the equation. I imagine it is a withered old organ. I could check, of course, but it hardly seems worth the effort."

The blade reflects only red light, all other colours absorbed by the liquid coating its surface. Then its light is planted it in the old man's meat, opening him up further. Will's feet approach the table, and he watches as Hannibal parts flesh, reaches through and liberates the liver.

The priest dies as the first kidney is cut free, and Will's gaze snap up to where his eyes have become empty marbles. When he next looks down, Hannibal is lifting the second kidney into a plastic bag with its sibling. He caps the scalpel and unwraps the bloodied plastic bag from his hand, places them both in the remaining empty ziplock, and seals it.

"Second," Hannibal carries on, still pretending to talk to Padre Venturi, "the evocative imagery. 'Threes' are very important in the art of your religion. But as you rather failed to live up to the standards set by your messiah, let's just give you two marks, shall we? Father and Holy Ghost. That seems about right. Your conduct resembled more that of the vengeful Old Testament god, and of course you get full marks for school spirit – no one could doubt the enthusiasm with which you carried out your duties."

He picks up the candlestick closest to him and positions it cautiously over the hole he has carved out of the priest, his other hand holding back a flap of skin. He takes a moment of care to avoid the large intestine, then lowers it with a firm and determined twist, forcing the base of the gold stand to sit within Venturi's torso, supported by muscles that used to hold organs.

Satisfied that the candlestick will remain stable, Hannibal leans forward to study the priest's face. His gloved hands reach up and grip the man's jaw, opening and closing his mouth to assess its stretch, and for a moment Will sees him as he had been alive, not a moment ago, mouth working soundlessly. Then Hannibal cups the chin in both hands and his shoulders bunch as he forces the jaw down. A sickening crunch, and the priest's mouth is released to fall open artlessly.

The second candlestick is brought to the man's mouth, his unhinged jaw brought up to cup the other side of the gold base. A slight frown as Hannibal watches the angle list, the candlestick canting toward the one already embedded in the man's abdomen. He lifts out the ornament and repositions the man's tongue, then tries again with a more agreeable result.

Hannibal steps back to reflect on his tableau, a tightening around his eyes suggesting something amiss. Will nods, he sees it too: the work is incomplete. It's just a little thing – obvious enough that Hannibal has already thought of it – but Will's body moves of its own accord, anticipating the final flourish. He walks to one side of the altar, where the short candles are burning in their safe red housings. He picks one up and approaches Hannibal, mindful of the arc of intestines between them, and offers the open flame.

Looking Will in the eye for the first time, Hannibal smiles with a radiance unmatched by any of the painted saints in attendance. His fingers wrap around Will's and pause there a moment, to communicate with a touch the understanding passing between them. Hannibal lights the tapers and steps back to consider the whole. It takes Will a moment to look away from the points of light in Hannibal's eyes, and then he too steps back to look at the scene.

It is not Hannibal's most elaborate work, but already evidences the precision of his cuts and the whimsy in his improvisation. He's not a surgeon yet, but he has the anatomical knowledge, singular focus, and steady hands that he'll need for the job. And, yes, this is his medium, this is his art. And it is beautiful.

Hannibal puts away his gloves, dons his jacket, retrieves his coat and pockets the organs before folding the garment over his arm. Will watches, alert and all but disembodied until Hannibal motions him towards the vestibule. They leave the church through a side door, and Will is back to following Hannibal in silence as he leads them back towards the apartment, although this time he is directly behind Hannibal rather than skulking in the shadows. His mind remains gloriously empty, although he can sense turbulent thoughts churning in the mantle below. He doesn't care for them now; now he feels the sprig of zest in his step, the electricity crackling in his nerves, each inhalation bringing life into his lungs.

The silence holds until they reach Hannibal's kitchen, where he repackages the organs in brown paper and places them in the refrigerator. Will remains in the doorway, feeling as

though he has returned to the position of spectre, until Hannibal turns and pins him in in the physical world.

"You branded yourself an observer, but became a participant."

Will nods, "You thought you would have to kill me."

A single nod of confirmation, then, "I feared it."

Hence the kiss, Will supposes. The memory makes him break eye contact, hands clenching into fists, apprehensive, and his mind scrambles for something else. He plucks the scalpel from his pocket. "Is that why you gave me this? A fighting chance?"

"You indicated you felt more at ease with a blade about your person." There's something unspoken behind that, several somethings, actually, and Will crosses the kitchen to place the scalpel on the table, before stepping back from it again.

Hannibal observes this with a sharpness only slightly diluted by amusement, then turns to the cupboard and pulls out a pair of small crystal glasses. "Sit," he instructs, before leaving Will alone to examine the small receptacles. They are the size of shot glasses, but elevated like wineglasses. Or like candlesticks. Will smiles.

He is rotating one absently when Hannibal returns in a fresh shirt, carrying a curved glass bottle of amber liquid. "Krupnikas," he announces, placing it on the table with its label facing Will. "A traditional honey liqueur originating from the monasteries of my homeland. Generally too sweet for my tastes, but fitting as a digestif, especially after a dish best served cold."

The nail of one fine thumb pierces the metal foil and runs around the top of the bottle, before those strong fingers grip tightly and wrench the stoppered cork free with a pleasing thunk. The soothing soundscape continues as the spirit is poured, *glop glop,* into the glasses, and Will leans forward inquisitively, gratified when alcohol fumes drift up to tickle his nose.

Lifting his glass in tandem with Hannibal, the meeting of their gazes serves as a toast, and Will waits to see if Hannibal plans to sip his or throw it back, before following suit and taking a sip of his own. It is sweet, but not in the cloying way some ports are, there's a spiciness to it that makes him think of autumn.

A moment of contemplation. "I like it."

With a slight smile and a polite cant of his head, Hannibal acknowledges Will's appreciation. He makes no effort to fill the silence; he waits for Will. Knowing this, Will fidgets, then stills himself, reaching for the same calm he had felt after Hannibal's kill.

"The Priest, Father Venturi, he… abused children?"

"Yes, though – not in the way that some others do, thankfully. He was a great advocate for corporal punishment. Many of the boys in the orphanage were scarred for life – physically and otherwise. There was a death, not long after I arrived. He was moved on after that."

Orphanage? Will thinks back (forward?) to Hannibal's brief mention of his parent's death, what had he said? *The 'proverbial' orphan until I was adopted by my Uncle Robertas...* How clever, to distance himself from the concept with alliterative framing. "But you held on to his memory all this time?"

Hannibal knocks back his drink and his expression challenges Will to do the same. He pours them both another round, then leans back, with his glass held meditatively before him. "I have a long memory. And if there is one thing I find more 'unspeakably ugly' than discourtesy, it is brutality directed at children."

Pieces click into place in Will's head. A sister who died violently, an orphanage of vulnerable children; the man in the dungeon, the priest from tonight… Hannibal's pathology doesn't stem from narcissism and contempt, not originally; it grew from a hostile environment where abject cruelty horrified an already traumatised boy. Much like Will would have in the same situation, Hannibal had *felt* each vicious or unkind act meted out on those around him, but with his conviction that he could bend the world, he resolved to extinguish the perpetrators. Perhaps that was why he turned his patients into killers; the coping mechanism had served him well.

Having been brooded upon for some time, the small volume of liquid ensnared in Hannibal's glass is thrown down his throat, and once again he fires Will a commanding glare. Will obeys and clacks the empty glass down on the table, feeling this second shot go to his head. The bottle makes its journey between the glasses, bowing at each in turn, and Will glances up at Hannibal with some suspicion. "Don't you have class tomorrow?"

"I find I need very little sleep," Hannibal replies, glancing down at his leather satchel, which still rests against the wall, undisturbed since Friday's meal. His gaze lingers on the innocuous book-bag. He angles his body more fully towards his guest and pins him with eyes to rival Medusa. "You haven't commented on the organs."

Will relaxes slightly. "You intend to eat them," he states, slowly rotating his glass on the table, admiring the caramel light cast through it onto the table.

"I do."

A small smile lifts the edge of Will's mouth and he lifts his eyes. Hannibal, as expressionless now as his counterpart will be, waits without blinking, and Will's smile widens. He shifts his shoulders slightly in the suggestion of a shrug. Hannibal nods, breaks eye contact briefly, and twitches his own lips.

"And if I invited you to join me?"

Will wants to laugh. "Oh come on, like you haven't already been feeding me people."

The quick slip of confusion across Hannibal's face shakes the mufflers from the warning bells and Will goes very, very still.

"As a matter of fact, I have not. How interesting that you should have thought otherwise. Which brings me to a matter of some curiosity." The eyes are cold now, not the tunnels to his

charred soul, but the icy armour of the monster. He reaches down to his book-bag, and, pulls a small rectangle of card from its side pocket. The postcard of the Primavera. Will's postcard. He almost reaches for it, but holds his hands back, dread thumping in his gut, scar stinging with remembered pain.

Hannibal places it on the table. Botticelli's masterpiece, alive with flowers, sits on the wooden table between them. "Why did you come to the Uffizi, Will? Why this painting?"

Because of you, you, you…

The frantic moth in Will's throat must be his pulse; his thoughts reel in a cyclone around the perimeter of his brain, but he braces in the eye of the storm determined to endure. "It's all I had." A whisper.

"That, and a knife," Hannibal corrects, at a reasonable volume. "What did you expect to find there? Waiting for you at this painting?"

You. You, you, you. "Answers."

"Within the painting? Clues from the Renaissance?" A trace of mockery.

Will's jaws are clenched, he tries to relax them when he speaks. "I was told my friend was… greatly inspired by the painting."

"Ah yes, your mysterious 'friend'." One of Hannibal's hands still rests its fingertips on the top of the postcard, over the fruit trees and the cherub. His index fingers taps twice on its glossy finish. "Tell me Will, when did you first meet your companionable monster?"

"A couple of years ago, maybe three."

"So, 1986? 1987?"

"Something like that."

The cold snap in Hannibal's eyes grows icicles, and Will shivers. Hannibal echoes him, "'Something like that.'"

The hand resting on the postcard blurs and latches onto Will's wrist, his other hand operating in tandem to pluck the scalpel from the table and hold it away, out of Will's reach. For all his speed, the contact just shies from being punishingly tight, a grip that's trying to be firm but fair. He narrows his eyes, "Occasionally, when I look at you, the equations don't add up. It's like looking at Hawking's work, that pesky infinity at the heart of a singularity; so convenient, so nonsensical."

Having one's heart in one's throat is meant to just be an expression, but right now Will could believe the organ is seeking escape through the nearest exit. His pulse hammers through his veins, a deafening fire alarm, impossible to think around. Hannibal's next words are polite, as sharp as the capped blade he is not-quite threatening Will with.

"At your request I have shed my so-called 'person suit' and shown you my 'truth'. I would appreciate it if you could return the courtesy to some degree, and answer these next questions honestly. I promise I'll keep them simple. I want you to tell me again, Will, where are you from?"

"Wolf Trap, Virginia."

"Good. Now tell me, *when* are you from?"

Will's mouth falls open. *No.*

The sensation of cold water douses his body; *it can't be.* He thinks of tearing himself free of Hannibal's grasp, but it's too late for that now. It's been too late for a long time. And besides, it's all he can do to shut his mouth from where his jaw has dropped it.

The silence stretches as Will rummages through a dozen different denials while Hannibal's grip tightens incrementally. Finally, Hannibal's thumb pops the cap off the scalpel, but Will still can't speak; fears Hannibal knowing the truth more than having an artery opened. But the blade doesn't come for his wrist or throat, it moves forward and the flat of the blade flips the postcard.

It's blank on the back, apart from the Uffizi Gallery's name in a small square at the top left, and some small print along the bottom… *Primavera di Sandro Botticelli. Galleria degli Uffizi, editori in Firenze ©2012 Riproduzione vietata.'* Will stares at the four little numbers. He wonders if it's too late to scratch them out.

He laughs, at the absurdity of it, at the unfairness of it. "That… what? You think that's a year? It's just four…" He looks up as Hannibal's grip tightens further on his wrist, sees how much of a mistake it would be to finish the sentence. He closes his mouth, and then his eyes. When he feels capable of opening them again, he looks at Hannibal and snarls, "You've known the whole time."

"Known? No. Been open to the possibility? Since that first evening, yes."

"It's *insane*!" Will rarely shouts, unless someone else raises their voice first, but how could Hannibal possibly believe this? Will is the one it has happened to, and *he* still doesn't really believe it. He glowers furiously at Hannibal, whose seems to be reading some invisible text behind Will's eyes.

Finally, having absorbed whatever information he finds there, Hannibal releases Will's wrist and leans back. "Insane? No. Inexplicable? Perhaps. But I should like you to earnestly try. "

Feeling the mulish set of his jaw as he draws his arm back, Will tries to compose his face and dampen the flames of shame that have warmed his cheeks. He is an idiot. He knew Hannibal had seen the postcard, and at the very least, the quality of the postcard is likely superior to what they can produce in the late 80s. If he had really thought Hannibal could believe such a *preposterous* concept, maybe he would have been more concerned, more discreet with his words.

It’s too late now. The worst has happened, and what does it really matter? When has any of this ever been within his control?

Stultifying defeat slumps him in his chair, leaving him a puppet with cut strings and just enough spine to keep his head up. He nods.

The scalpel is capped again and Hannibal throws it into the sink, lifts his glass, and issues another challenge. “To the truth then.”

Will lifts his own glass, bleakly concluding, “And all its consequences.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, well so much for my goal of keeping this to 30,000 words, I’ve completed this now, and I’ve gone ~7000 words over the limit. But… I had fun. And hopefully you will too. So, :D

Also, let’s be honest, in this fic, Will is the Tom Holland of keeping secrets (i.e. not super great at it).

Next chapter is the concluding chapter, but there's a fairly hefty epilogue for you too!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this is a day late, I had a godawful migraine from Saturday 'til this morning.

This chapter finally justifies the E tag, if you're not interested in the NSFW content, I've marked + at the start and ~ where it ends, so you can skip if you prefer!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The alcohol burns a sweet trail down his throat, and a shaky breath slides from Will's parted lips. He sets down his glass, flexes his hands, finds his palms are clammy, and places them down on the table.

"I came here from 2016."

Not even a flicker of surprise, or any emotion. It really isn't fair. He should be able to shock Hannibal with this. Hannibal wasn't meant to have *guessed* the fucking impossible.

"And in 2016…" Will continues, trying to draw strength in through his lungs, "We are… friends."

"'Friends.'" The inadequate noun, bandied between them all weekend, now occupies the room with overwhelming gravitas.

Will's eyes are leaking again; not crying, no, just, watering. "Friends," he whispers back.

Eyes sliding down to where Will's hand has moved to sit over his abdomen, Hannibal asks, "I give you that scar?"

"Yes."

"But I allow you to live."

"Yes."

"And why did you come here, to my past?"

A hiccup of laughter breaks Will from his stunned diffidence. "I *really* didn't mean to. I have no idea how it happened, or how to get back."

A shadow passes across Hannibal's features, dimming the light of intrigue momentarily. Possibly it's a trick of Will's tired eyes, possibly not. Hannibal licks his lips and considers his

own hands, sitting neatly cradled on the table. “You were pushed from your train in 2016, and walked into Florence, in 1989?”

“Yup. In a nutshell.”

Hannibal muses on this for a moment. “Einstein used trains to illustrate the concept of temporal relativity. Perhaps he drew inspiration from an experience like yours.”

“You think Einstein travelled in time?”

“It’s not even a hypothesis, as it cannot be tested or disproven, merely an interesting parallel.”

The sound that Will forces from his throat can hardly be classified as a laugh. “Yeah, well, maybe Europe’s railways are littered with wormholes, or maybe I’m crazy and this is all in my head, or maybe fate just picked me to kick in the balls.” Will doesn’t want any more honeyed alcohol. He’d quite like a beer, but there’s none on offer. “Have you got any more of that Lapsang tea?”

While Hannibal prepares the tea, Will rests his head on his hands, exhausted by the entire situation, by his own foolishness. Hannibal stands by Will’s chair as he places the teapot on the table, and when he doesn’t move away, Will looks up.

A blast of furnace heat shoots through him as he meets the cauldrons of those eyes, and he has to dig into his reserves of stubbornness to keep staring into that intensity. When Hannibal opens his mouth, Will escapes his gaze, only to be caught on the movement of his tongue as it wets his lip.

“Our situation disproves the current understanding of linear causality.” The low delivery holds the particular brand of intimacy that has been missing from their interactions thus far, a reverence and awe and conviction in the significance of their connection.

This must be the moment that Hannibal attains the certainty that underlies all his later exchanges with Will. He looms over Will like the ominous and immutable truth of their strange destiny, unavoidable and terrifying. He will bring so much pain to Will, and to the people Will once valued as colleagues and friends, but Will, this Will, has already withstood it and survived; is it too much to hope that he may have now passed through the worst of it?

Hannibal reaches out to cup Will’s cheek, the gesture immediately sparking adrenal glands as his system spikes with re-lived trauma and emotional arousal. He keeps his eyes locked on the medical student and sees the shadow return again, clouding the bright burn of his scrutiny.

Drawing his hand away he gently places the tips of his fingers where the heat of his palm had rested, then draws those away too. This time, Will finds himself missing the contact, but he reins in the impulse to chase them. Hannibal returns to his side of the table, sitting slowly, as though older than his years.

The tea is poured, and Hannibal sets the teapot down with heavy limbs and half-lidded eyes, examining the few loose tealeaves that slipped through the strainer and are visible

through the tawny liquid steaming in its cup. It takes Will a moment to understand what he is observing, because he has never seen it before. The engineered mask of sadness has always sat wrong on Hannibal face, looking a little coy, a little wistful. The raw grief he displayed when gutting Will and severing Abigail's throat was an emotion already submitted to, processed and planned for. These averted eyes and steady but reluctant movements speak to Hannibal actively struggling with an emotion.

Fascination crackles like sherbet in the back of Will's brain, and has him leaning slightly forward, candidly observing, as Hannibal so often does without remorse. His blatancy has Hannibal closing off his emotion, raising steady eyes to contemplate him in return, and Will curses internally.

"What is it?" Will urges, stirring some mirth from the other man. Will tries to tap into that, "Come on, don't start holding out on me now."

With a single sway of his head, Hannibal refuses the topic. "We have already trespassed too far into tomorrow's morning to indulge in maudlin thoughts."

He looks at the tea dispassionately and then stands again, stretching out one shoulder, and Will wonders if he hurt himself while mutilating that priest. He notices the way the fabric moves across the hard span of Hannibal's chest and fights a small wave of dizziness. Anxiety fizzes up from his guts and warmth sweeps through his face, a desert wind fighting to escape the confines of his body.

Hannibal takes in the colour coming to his face with curious amusement, and Will looks away, blinking a little more than might be necessary. *How* many shots of that devil honey spirit had he sucked back? The tea in their cups sits untasted, and Hannibal ignores it, pushing his chair in. He pauses, dextrous fingers tapping in waves along the top of the chair back, and Will can feel the expectation of his gaze. It never ceases to amaze how Hannibal can demand eye contact through posture alone, but Will can read an order when it's transmitted, and this time he's not stubborn enough to refuse.

The eyes catch and hold him, the strength of Hannibal's self-assurance supporting them both. A smile gently pulls at Hannibal's lips, and he cants his eyebrows, as though asking why Will is remaining seated. Will's body stands up, mind protesting loudly that it hadn't definitively decided on doing that.

This seems to be what Hannibal was waiting on though, because he comes to stand in front of Will, a little too close, as he always used to be. "Before you go to bed, you should allow me to check your wounds."

"My wounds?" Will's brain is racing without getting anywhere, too busy trying to read between the lines to focus on the words themselves.

Hannibal's fingers reach out and hesitate before touching the buttons on Will's shirt, "May I?"

"Mmmmm," Will swallows the uncertain noise, and then nods. *Sure, just a little medical check up at three in the morning…*

Deft fingers glide down the buttons, and then the material is gripped at his waist and tugged free of his slacks. Will shivers, tensing further. The freshly revealed buttons are swiftly dealt with, and then warm business-like hands are shucking the shirt from his shoulders.

Eyes traveling in tandem with his hand, Hannibal reaches to the dark streaks of thickened healing flesh at his neck, traces around the cuts, running his fingers lightly around the tender raised edges. Sparks shoot from the site, and Will tilts his head, feels the tissue stretch as his skin pulls, the sensitivity increasing as he does so. It's almost exactly where Abigail had her throat cut, twice - and more than that, by his own hand in dreams. Once again, his body betrays him, and he starts to tremble under Hannibal's gentle touch.

"Properly inflamed, as befits healing. No infection." The tips of Hannibal's fingers trail down his neck to reach the graze at the edge of his shoulder, and he presses into the flesh between tough scabrous tissue and reddened skin. He kneads his thumb into the ball of Will's shoulder, and there's an unexpected jolt of pleasure-pain.

It refocuses Will's attention on Hannibal, and he finds wry humour below the embers of his gaze. "Rotator cuff issues?" he queries.

"Being shot and stabbed never helped."

Hannibal hums a low murmur of agreement, allowing his thumb to drift – feather light – across the puckered scar Jack's bullet bestowed. Will has to hold his breath as the pads of Hannibal's fingers trace down his ribs, pausing just shy of the chasm of scar tissue that separates Will's sternum from his navel.

"May I?" He asks again, voice hardly more than a whisper, carried on a breath that smells sweet, like summer wine.

"You created it." Having to force its way through closed teeth, Will's response is as quiet, and muffled to boot, but Hannibal takes it for consent and his fingers continue their exploration. Will stifles a sound, hands reflexively come up to grip the shirt at Hannibal's waist, holding on in anticipation of the pain… but there is no pain. There's barely any sensation from the scar itself as the cord of pink flesh is smoothed from tip to tip. As if to compensate, the remaining nerves in Will's body are singing in a deafening chorus, and he finds his head falling forward to rest on Hannibal's shoulder, overwhelmed, twisting fabric in his fingers.

"Ssh, Will." A hand cups the back of his neck, brings him into a proper embrace. Will folds against Hannibal's frame. It's not the same frame that held him up as his blood splashed across his shoes; this shoulder is sharper under his chin, narrower and marginally less padded with muscle. The scent of him is different on the surface, the same underneath.

"It feels like you're a stranger," Will whispers.

"I feel as if I've known you forever," The reverberation from Hannibal's words travels into Will's diaphragm. "Or as though I will." The fingers on Will's nape slide up to bury into the hair at the back of his head.

The scrape of nails against his scalp is liquefying. “You’ve permeated every part of me. I don’t know if can separate myself from you anymore.”

Hannibal pulls back far enough to look him in the eye. “Then there is only one practical solution,” some humour in the depths of the vertiginous black pupils, “you must learn to appreciate ourselves.”

A bubble of laughter gets snagged in his throat. He wants to feel those lips pressed against his again, but closing the distance is beyond him. Hannibal brings their foreheads together and the brush of his lashes against Will’s own is a more intimate kiss than the meeting of their mouths had been on the street outside.

The history of Will’s relationship with his lungs is one fraught with tension, and once again they seem to be bristling under his command. Maintaining steady breathing and not gulping for air demands more control than usual, and there’s a weight growing in his chest. Hannibal’s hands hold him with quiet indemnity. The kitchen around them darkens in his mind, to the receding depths of the ocean, the water pressing in; but he knows this dream, all he has to do is stop fighting and he will be able to breathe just fine.

He takes a deeper breath and pulls Hannibal closer by the fingers knotted in his shirt, tilts his face for the kiss. Hannibal’s body is warm and solid, his lips soft as they press against his own. His arms encompass Will more fully, electricity sparking along the boundaries where they meet. Will isn’t thinking about breathing any more. He has stunned his central nervous system into submission and his lungs are pulling greedy draughts of air through his nostrils, but it doesn’t matter, couldn’t matter less, because he is *kissing Hannibal*.

Hannibal’s mouth opens, and Will’s does too, teeth hard behind parted lips as they each feel the cavern of the other’s maw echoing in the exchange of air. Their mouths close again, lips catching and swiping and dragging, and the next time Hannibal’s lips part Will licks inquisitively under the top lip, a little curl of the tip of his tongue, not yet bold enough to go past those teeth. The side of his tongue is met with a courteous introduction from the slick heat of Hannibal’s own, before it slides inside him.

The water has well and truly entered his lungs, and is filling the empty clay of his legs, turning them heavy and liquid. He’s light headed, and it doesn’t take the exquisite sensation where is anatomy is pressed against Hannibal to figure out where the blood has gone. Hannibal starts to draw back and Will clutches him tighter, deepens the kiss with urgency, pressing into Hannibal’s mouth with his own tongue, the riffle of taste buds gaining a full palate of the other man’s taste. He pulls his tongue back and draws breath from Hannibal, swallowing the air from his lungs, wanting to inhale the man along with it.

Dissuaded from pulling away, Hannibal takes command of the kiss. He disengages an arm to swat Will’s chair out the way, snatching at one of Will’s wrists as he backs him against the wall, pinning him and bearing down on him unrepentantly. Bruising his lips, catching them in his teeth, and gripping harder now, nails biting; he’s unremitting, an unmoving block of stone caging Will in place, who, in turn, can no longer keep still, free hand roving, clawing, hips grinding, muscles straining against the force of Hannibal’s hold. Lost and aroused, writhing and pushing and pulling, and Hannibal is all around him, drinking him in, a cliff for Will to dash himself against.

Less dextrous than Hannibal in this moment, Will fumbles at a button then gives in to frustration and rips the shirt open to press his palm to the skin beneath. Hannibal chuckles into his mouth. It should be strange to sample hard muscles and coarse hair instead of smooth soft curves, but it feels to Will as though his hands have been waiting for this tactile sensation longer than his mind has. The way the heel of his hand hits resistance at the pectoral muscle, his fingers splaying over the shallow rise, excites a deeper exhalation from his lungs, and Hannibal breaks the kiss.

His dark eyes and swollen lips remain within reach, but Will just looks on, dazed, as Hannibal's blink prefaces his query. "You're kissing me as though this is the first time."

"It is," Will sighs, briefly surprised at how easy it is to breathe.

"Is it?" Hannibal's eyes rove Will's features with haunted hunger, rendering him speechless. A smile scythes through him, "I'm going to take you to bed now Will."

All Will can do is nod, and lean in again.

Still kissing him resolutely, Hannibal steers Will through the apartment, and Will walks backwards blindly, mindful of nothing beyond the press and yield of Hannibal at his mouth. How have they never done this before? It feels as if every conversation has been a substitute for this need, all of it a tortuous build up to this inevitability, sleights of hand that hid the frustrated desire in them both. How long has it been burning against the deadened nerve endings of his secret heart? How much damage has his system endured while denying this consuming attraction?

It doesn't matter, they're here now, *he's* here now, pressing him up against a door, pushing him through the door. Will is alive, and his body is awash with exuberance. They crash onto the bed and he rolls them so he can clamber over Hannibal, knees on either side of his slender frame.

"You." He kisses Hannibal's jaw. "Are." He kisses Hannibal's throat. "So." Kiss. "Fucking." Kiss. "Beautiful." Kiss.

\+ Hannibal huffs a laugh and spins them again, carefully cradling Will's neck with one palm as he does so, perhaps wary of accidentally killing him. He pins Will to the bed and takes his own turn at Will's throat, with nips and growls. His right hand stretches down to work at Will's slacks, then he rears back and tugs the material down Will's hips.

"Yours too," Will instructs, breathily, and Hannibal complies with a dark look while Will works his legs free of his own trousers and shoes.

Lunging back in with another growl, Hannibal interrupts Will's attempt to remove his remaining sock, slamming him back onto the bed sheets and swiping his tongue in a broad stroke up the curve of his abdominal scar.

"Fuck." Will bucks up off the bed, conscious thought scattered to the four winds, and then warm pressure grips him through his boxers and he bucks up again before he regains some restraint.

Pressing kisses down his hip, Hannibal side-eyes him. “You have a dirty mouth when you’re excited, Will,” The low rumble of his voice fills his ears with the same thrill currently being palmed into his cock.

“Perhaps you should do the talking then.”

A pale brow arches. “There is something I would rather do with my mouth.”

“Oh my God.”

“Shall I take that as a yes?”

“Yes.”

The boxers disappear and Will squirms with sudden vulnerability as the flushed head surges up to grasp at freedom. Hannibal only gives it an appreciative moment to enjoy its newfound liberty before sucking the tip into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the glans, and swallowing to engulf the length entirely. Will shudders with a moan, and Hannibal’s eyes flash up to lock on his; fierce with possession, a lion over its kill, unwilling to share. That, as much as the sensation of him drawing back up with tight smooth lips has Will’s head falling back to groan out some of the building tension in his chest.

Finger tips dig into his soft inner thigh, and he knows Hannibal wants his audience. He rolls his head around to watch again, and his brain just can’t process the visual, that fine bone structure and incredible mind and those perfect lips wrapped around *his* cock, sliding up and down, up and down; it’s too erotic, obscene given everything he knows, but so fucking *right.*

Unable to subdue them any longer, Will’s hips rock up, and Hannibal’s eyes flash with devil’s mirth. With a hand on his abdomen, Hannibal forces Will back down onto the bed and slides his mouth back and off Will. Will’s jaw flexes with frustrated need and Hannibal nuzzles at the trembling length before he climbs up over Will to stare down from directly above. One hand trails behind, teasing the straining erection he has left in his wake.

“There’s something I want you to do, Will.”

Biting down on the ‘anything’ that nearly slips out his mouth, Will tries to corral his runaway thoughts. “Wha-”Another firm stroke overrides the word with a whimper. He scrabbles for control. “What is it?”

“I want you to come inside me.”

The words make Will jump in Hannibal's hand. “Fuck. Hannibal, I…” The idea is electrifying and terrifying. “I wouldn’t know what I’m doing.”

“It would be my first time too, but I have the knowledge if not the experience.” He releases his hold on Will’s cock, repositions himself to lean on that hand while he strokes Will’s lower lip with the other. The static of thought fragments are beginning to coalesce into rational thought again, which is dangerous in an amorous situation, but how else can he consider this new request?

Seeing the battle take root behind Will's eyes, Hannibal leans in and brushes his lips against Will's, holds himself millimetres apart. "I will take so much from you, Will; I already have. Let me give you this." Will can see his own dilated pupils and the wrinkle of his concern reflected in Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal kisses him breathless, then sits back and drags Will upright, fixes him with that incontestable gaze again. "It's not altruistic, Will. We defy time itself. I want to feel you move inside me, and fix it in four dimensions. I want you to give me your pain, your grief, your anger, I want you to bury them in my body, as deep as you can. I want you to empty the bitterness you carry into me, and forgive us both."

Heart pounding, body eager, Will can't bring himself to say yes; it's as horrifying as it is tantalising, the idea of pouring all his emotion into Hannibal – it likely wouldn't be pretty. He champs at the moralistic bit in his teeth. "'Successful religions use excessive symbology and evocative imagery', you said, is that what you're trying to do here? Make a believer of me?"

Hannibal buries his face in Will's curls, sets his teeth against Will's lobe and nibbles lightly. "I believe I'm the acolyte petitioning the deity, currently."

"More like the serpent whispering temptations; I haven't heard any actual petitioning yet."

Hannibal draws back a little, a more nefarious smile stealing across his lips. When it emerges, the plea is more of a command, but the words sweep away Will's resistance, "Please, Will. Please will you fuck me?"

Will swallows heavily, and nods.

Retrieving the lubricant from a crumpled paper bag, Hannibal sits up on his knees and holds the bottle in his hands. "I can do the first part, if you would prefer me to?"

An awkward rush of air from Will and he gives a guilty smile. "Uh, sure?"

Hannibal grins at him wolfishly and pops the lid open, Will's attention quickly snares on the glossy finish coating Hannibal's long fingers. As he reaches behind himself, Will stretches out on his stomach to follow the demonstration, and hears Hannibal give a low chuckle. He ignores it, fixed instead on the slow glide of Hannibal's finger between his cheeks. When the angle of his wrist changes, and a finger breaches the cavity, Will sits up. "No." he says, determinedly. "I'll do it."

Hannibal acquiesces with a flash of his eyes and a nod, and Will lubricates his fingers efficiently, using the heel of one hand to tip Hannibal forward onto his hand and knees. He strokes the small of Hannibal's back, noticing the tidy divot at the end of his spine, the fine hairs. He kisses the area gently, the downy warmth on his lips generating a moment of innocent affection, before his hand slides down to prepare Hannibal for something altogether carnal.

He trails his fingers back and down between the warm pressure of his cheeks, and when the tips of his fingers find the edge of the puckered opening it gives a tremble in response. He works slowly, starting with one digit, taking too long, and Hannibal grinds his teeth and

shudders. A second finger, pushing against the resistance of his body, measured and considerate, and Hannibal has to snarl “more” before Will tries a third. The sheets are coming away from the mattress as Hannibal bunches them in his fists, rocking back onto Will’s fingers.

“Will, please,” Hannibal’s appeal is breathless, and sounds more like an entreaty than his previous attempt. Will grins, freeing his hand to retrieve the bottle. He is liberal in the application, coating himself up and squeezing his cock through an oval in his fingers, as though to brief it for its mission.

He positions himself behind Hannibal. “Are you sure about this?” he asks, lip caught between his teeth.

A sardonic smirk, “Will.”

Will hesitates, then growls and tugs Hannibal’s arm out from under him, rolling him onto his back. “I want to see your face.”

Looking up at him unabashedly with, devastating half-lidded eyes, he sighs, “Of course, *mylimasis.”*

Shaking more than the man beneath him, he pulls Hannibal’s legs over his shoulders, kisses one of his knees. He thumbs the smooth swollen tip of his cock as he places it reverentially before the entrance to Hannibal’s body, his own breath hitching in incredulity.

He pushes in slowly, jaw working silently; the velvet interior parts in a way Will’s fingers couldn’t have prepared him for. Nerve endings ignite, waves of pleasure chase along the lay-lines of his mortal flesh. Heat blasts through him, sweat prickling across him as the aching sweetness of Hannibal’s flesh grips the head of his erection. “Oh Jesus.”

Hannibal’s face beneath him is flushed, hanging on to Will’s every tremor with parted lips. The muscles of Will’s limbs are thrumming with the satisfaction of a languid stretch, and he lets himself sink further in. The resistance, the give, the gripping pressure, the perfect texture against the humming delirium of his cock; a moan passes his lips and he’s still not fully encased.

They’re both panting heavily as Hannibal’s body accepts the final inch, and he slides home fully with a curse on his lips, head bowing. “Oh fuck. Oh fuck, Hannibal. Fuck.”

A quick tongue darts out and wets Hannibal’s bottom lip, he’s breathing hard, rib cage expanding and contracting, eyes dilated and as black as tar. Will quivers, looking down, absorbing the sight with complete disbelief, stunned at the sight and sensation of them merging.

Hannibal’s body holds him with near-punishing pressure, which eases slightly as he adjusts. Fingers flex on his shoulder and bicep, “Move, Will.”

Drawing back teases, re-entry rewards, the tight bands of muscle guide his rocking motion. Despite the delicious pull when he retracts his hips, it is the rocking forward, being

welcomed in, that lifts each new tier in the construction of pleasure.

The passage is tight, he's going slow, relishing the experience, lost in waves of honeyed friction, rolling in and out of Hannibal's heat, brushing against his prostate and making him shudder beautifully.

"Will," fingers dig into his arms, "remember who I am."

Dazed, Will refocuses on Hannibal's face. "I know who you are."

Hannibal's eyes pierce into his, flaying back the mist of his bliss. His teeth bare in a snarl. "Then show me. Show me you know me – in my entirety."

And it all comes flooding back; the manipulation, the encephalitis, the ear, the murder*, all the murder*, framing him, sleeping with Alana, killing Beverly, setting Randall on him, corrupting his dogs with human flesh, corrupting *him* with human flesh, spilling him on the kitchen floor, slitting Abigail's throat… abandoning him.

His hips drive harder with each remembered transgression until he is slamming into Hannibal with righteous pulsating fury, aware that he's hitting his prostate with every strike and the *bastard* is enjoying this. Hannibal is pushing up to meet him, to take him deeper, cock jumping and leaking between them as Will surges in, building an unremitting tempo.

Will's hands are on Hannibal's face, clutching and distorting the skin there, trying to see older Hannibal in the young man's features, holding back the urge to batter into the face with his fists as he channels the aggression into his snapping hips. Flexing and taught as a bowstring, fucking into his enemy's submission, the catharsis is real.

When Hannibal comes with a cry, Will refocuses again, seeing the lithe young man writhe and jerk, spilling over his belly, body constricting around Will's cock in the process. His hips stutter and he slackens his pace, seeing the man again, and not the monster; a man who is breathless and looking up at him with such blinding adoration that Will feels his throat tighten.

He can't find the brutality of a moment ago. The bitterness is gone, expelled not with his own release, but with Hannibal's. He splays his fingers across the heaving ribs, feeling the strong body beneath him, and bends to lay kisses at one edge of his lips, tracing lines over Hannibal's body to feel the shivers of his overstimulation.

His own crescendo, momentarily plateaued with the strength of tender emotion, mounts again as he ruts in and glides out, this time with a low slow heat that engulfs him cock first, spreading into abdomen and legs, then his whole body, filling him up with molten pleasure. Sheathing himself as deeply as possible as his orgasm crests and breaks; he comes, clinging to Hannibal, who is licking his name off Will's astonished lips.

A transcendent moment of blank absence; the peace between the ticking of the clock, the silence that stretches between the stars. He shudders alive to find himself still wrapped in Hannibal's warmth, his breath and the thumping of his heart an acceptable alternative to the stillness of the vacuum.

~

Morning's light seeps through the shutters, and Will wakes to find Hannibal watching him. It seems par for the course, and his first reaction is to snigger sleepily, before rubbing his eyes.

"Time is it?"

"A quarter passed ten."

Will scrunches his face. "You missing classes?"

"A couple of demonstrations, so far; another first for me." He winks at Will, who feels heat in his face, "It's quite alright; you see, despite today's truancy, I have it on good authority that I shall be a surgeon *and* a psychiatrist."

"Shit," Will sighs, hiding his face under one his arm. "Sorry - I really... shouldn't have said all that."

"I imagine it must have been quite hard not to," Hannibal chuckles, pulling away Will's arm to steal eye contact again. "While it takes some of the surprise out of the future, there is enough uncertainty still to keep me engaged." He strokes Will's face. The shade of pensiveness from the night before settles on his face, "I will be an old man when I see you again."

"Fifty's not-" It clicks into place then, and Will sits up, cinching the sheet around his hips. "You want me to go?"

Hannibal rolls onto his back, one arm folded casually behind his head, looking up at Will. "You said you don't know how to get back to 2016. But your implication was correct, you do need to go back. And I need to live my own life, while I wait for you. I expect it will be hard at times. I suspect I will also take comfort in knowing you are ahead of me. Even if I-" He stops speaking, a small line marring the smooth skin between his brows.

"What?" Will asks, reaching down to stroke a strand of hair from his forehead. "Even if you what?"

The eyes reveal those glowing cinders, but his voice is toneless. "Even if I must wait nearly three decades before I see you again, at which point I will be a stranger to you, and I will have to hurt you to the very limit of what you can tolerate, before sending you back here with no knowledge of whether I will see you again after."

Will quickly smothers the usual self-deprecating retort, that surely he won't be *too* hard to live without, his empathy giving him the truth of it. A span of years longer than Hannibal's current time alive stretches before him, waiting for someone who will not know him. Hannibal will ache for him with a hunger that will not be assuaged. The throbbing this sets up

in Will's chest has a bass reverberance, one that threatens to upset the equilibrium of his pulse.

"Hannibal…" No comforting thoughts rise to follow the name, only a reflection of grief for him. "I don't have to go back right away. I could stay… for a while. As long as I go back before we meet-"

Reaching up to stroke his cheek, Hannibal interrupts him with a smile. "Chances are, whatever this temporal anomaly is, it won't last for years. A lost weekend in time is one thing, but living out your life in the past?" He shakes his head. "Besides," his eyes sparkle with mirth to soften the statement, "you are terribly indiscreet, and I'd rather not have any more prophecies to live up to."

Swallowing down mingled bitterness and guilt, "I might not be able to get back at all."

"You must try, at any rate. And, the hope of seeing you – this you – again, beyond the version of you that hates me, is what I'll really be waiting for. I would like us both to be moving forward from the same point."

Will's eyes bead up with salt water, but he can see the sense in that. "I don't think I ever only hated you, by the time I cared enough to hate you… I already cared."

A thumb collects the moisture clinging to his lower lashes, Hannibal's hand warm against his cheek, eyes thoughtful and guileless. "I'm glad I met you, Will."

The sentiment saws through his breastbone, because even though he can't bring himself to say it, the same is true for him.

Will's shirt is spotted with yellow remnants of faded bloodstains, but feels crisp and clean against his chest, and smells of Hannibal's washing powder. Threads reach out from the left pant leg of his trousers, sea anemones in the gusting currents of wind. The route out of Florence is mostly uphill, and Will resents each step, each bead of sweat rolling down to contaminate the shirt.

This is a fool's errand, hiking up into the hills to find the train tracks again, following them (*how far?*) before turning around to retrace his steps to the city. Absurd. And he doesn't even know if he wants it to work.

Hannibal had showered and dressed for university, laid out Will's old clothes and made breakfast. It was difficult to tell if he had tightened the person suit around him, or if he had simply accepted circumstances and moved on.

What happens if this doesn't work? Can he go back to Hannibal? *Sorry sugar, looks like you're stuck with me.* How many times is he meant to walk backwards and forwards before giving up? Will walking be enough? Perhaps he should buy some train tickets and throw

himself off a few railway carriages. Eventually he would have to return to Hannibal. *Just patch me back up and I'll try again.* Maybe this time he'd say '*don't'*, he'd say '*stay'*.

There is some relief in finally reaching the railway line. He joins it where it meets the forest, where there is welcome shade and a slight levelling off of the slope; the gloom beneath the trees more apt for his mood. He turns to look back over Florence. The light strikes the cityscape from a different angle than his first sighting from this vantage point; a model turning its other cheek for the camera. He scoffs lightly at the vainglorious city, unwilling to admit he has been caught by her spell.

"See you in a few hours. Or a couple of decades."

At first, trains thunder along the line, and he gets plenty of time to clear out of sight before anyone could spot or report him. The trains get less frequent, and eventually stop altogether. The sleepers run under his feet like a metronome, like a light strobe; dark wood, pale grey gravel, flash, flash, flash; he falls into a semi-stupor as the hours pass and the shadows deepen around him.

He thinks of his last moment with Hannibal. How he had pulled Will in fiercely, kissed him like he meant to drown in him, then torn himself from his mouth with the same determination with which he had eviscerated him. An act which, Will now suspects, may have gutted them both.

Will sighs and kicks at a likely looking stone, sending it skittering off up the track with an uneven clatter, at which point he notices there's a faint consistent clacking ahead. He lifts his head to see the stag has taken the lead, its raven feathers glossy in the low light, gaining substance and texture as the gloaming forest darkens into night. Its welcome presence soothes the snarl of doubt in his bones, and suggests there may be a chance this time travel thing could work out okay.

This new faith lasts until they reach the junction that had vexed Will on his way in. Instead of turning up the path that Will had eschewed in favour of 'left', the stag continues to retrace their steps, towards Austria and Slovenia.

"Um. Are you sure?" Will calls after it. The stag doesn't deign to respond, and Will sighs. He hadn't really rationalised how he might have ended up in 1989, but – in typical anthropocentric human style – had vaguely wondered if it might not have been the choice he made at these crossroads. He has nothing to support this with, and it's just as ludicrous as the idea of trailing after a hallucination, so he shrugs and follows his stag.

His feet carry him on. The temperature drops, the birds fall silent. The gap in the trees becomes a channel of pale watery light as the moon rises. With the dusk chorus complete, the woods are quiet, only rustling and the occasional owl hoot accompanies the crunch of Will's footsteps – and those of his mirage.

And then, there are only his own footsteps.

He looks ahead at his stag, it is still there, but has stopped walking. Will irresolutely continues towards it, and it slowly turns to face him. They regard each other solemnly for a

moment. “I’m glad you didn’t die in Baltimore,” he murmurs, extending a hand to stroke its soft nose. Its large black eyes regard him with a wry affection that promises no leniency, and Will shivers. The stag tosses its head and buts Will in the side, nudging him a step backwards.

“Oh, this is far enough is it? I don’t have to walk all the way to Lithuania and back?”

The black stag lifts its head and looks down at him haughtily.

“Well I hope you’re right.” He begins to walk backwards. The stag stays where it is, and Will hesitates. “Aren’t you coming?”

The stag snorts, then peels off from the tracks at a ninety-degree angle, melting into the thick darkness of the trees. Will nods to himself, as though by agreeing to a silent answer it might become audible and clue him in. It doesn’t, and he turns back to his unlikely pilgrimage with sceptical surrender.

He’s limping again now, the sole of one shoe perforated on a sharper bit of gravel, his shoulders and neck brewing a small insurgency. His pace must have slowed more than he realised, because he walks and walks, walks and walks, and still doesn’t reach the junction in the tracks. Did he miss it? He’s not *actually* been asleep on his feet, as much as this whole night feels like a strange and comparatively mundane dream. The only option is to keep walking, and to pray that whatever track he’s now on, it doesn’t lead him to Milan. Or the 1500s.

The sun rises, the junction never comes, but the trees open out and Florence lies beneath him. The skyline she presents is as captivating as ever, but she’s loosened her belt, and her girth now spreads further down into the river valley, her shoulders more heavily freckled with villas.

His heart bounds in his chest. The city is more modern, but is it modern enough? Is it 2016? There’s no way to tell from here, but with renewed energy, he launches himself downhill to find out.

A newsstand tells him the date, and it’s almost enough to make him kiss the pavement. At this point it’s only marginally grimier than he feels, but he wisely discards the notion in favour of hurrying to the Uffizi with all available speed. He finds the stone anthropomorphisms of Spring and Summer again, standing sentinel on their side of the bridge. Across the river, police-vans and crowds have gathered around the cordoned off Palazzo Capponi, Will shrugs it off and lurches the last five hundred meters upriver to the stone colonnade of the gallery.

He finds his way through the halls to the room housing the Primavera without a single wrong turn. He grips the doorframe and holds his breath, ears ringing as his eyes disregard

the yellow walls, the chequered floors, priceless art, and every other stimuli, everything except the broad shoulders and neat dark hair.

He takes a moment to let the tension leave his body, and then gingerly approaches to sit beside Hannibal.

Hannibal, who must have smelled or at least heard him enter the room, finally lifts his eyes, which shine with tightly reined emotion. They take a moment to absorb each other, the familiar imperfections on Hannibal's perfect face are accentuated by a patina of shallow wounds. Will can't help but look away and smile; it's all too surreal.

"If I saw you every day forever, Will, I would remember this time."

Will looks back at him, and chuckles quietly, mouth stretching into his cheeks, his grin irrepressible. Hannibal is still peering at him cautiously, eyes flickering over his wounds, perhaps not quite daring to believe that this is a Will who has travelled in time.

"Strange to see you in front of me. Been staring at afterimages of you in places you haven't been in years, living in your distant memories." He gestures to Hannibal's face, "What happened to you?"

He tilts his head to better display his gouges. "A passing gift from Jack." Hannibal blinks slowly, "Your own wounds were properly tended to, I see."

It is a fight to force his mouth slack enough to form the words. "Found a good junior physician."

A small tremor runs through Hannibal's hand as he reaches up to tuck Will's curls behind his ear. "Are you sure they weren't just pre-med?"

Leaning into Hannibal's palm, Will gives a little shake of his head. "As far as I'm concerned, he's always been a doctor."

Hannibal's eyes close for a moment, and when he opens them again there is a sheen of moisture. "Have you forgiven me my crimes, or only the boy who had yet to commit them?"

Will lifts a hand to Hannibal's face, feeling the cheek he had caressed the night before, twenty seven years ago. The flesh is changed; composed of different cells, it holds the same DNA. The skin yields more easily beneath his fingers, but still carries the continuum of Hannibal. He leans towards him, and whispers, "You're the same monster."

The smile Hannibal unleashes would put supernovae to shame. It blooms out between them, through the fabric of spacetime, to bathe his face in heat and light, and behind it, in a slower percussion of matter, Hannibal's lips reach Will's.

Chapter End Notes

That’s the ‘end’, because it closes the story arc as I see it. I hope you find it an acceptable conclusion!

But it's not actually over, I'll be posting the epilogue next week, which I’m unofficially calling ‘Escape from Florence!’ It gives a glimpse into how these two interact now they’re moving forward from the same point, with some last little resolutions.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> You guys are the best, like, the actual best. Thank you so much for your encouragement and words of support. This fandom is so damn awesome! I think it attracts the coolest people ;)
>
> I had a lot of fun planning this chapter out, researching the layout of the location and figuring out how I would escape Florence in Hannibal's shoes. Google Maps street view was my friend, as it has been through this whole fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two men stumbling brokenly from the Ufizzi gallery attract some disapproving scowls and repel other gazes altogether. The little cloud of dopamine Will is riding on negates the discomfort this would normally stir up.

He reaches out and takes Hannibal's hand, lacing their fingers together with baffled wonder. Hannibal squeezes his fingers in return, then he rubs his thumb in a slow circle on Will's skin, lids lowering as he looks over with contemplative heat. That expression, on that face – the older Hannibal, the real Hannibal – drops a stun grenade in Will's limbic system. He stops walking and pulls Hannibal back for another kiss.

Kissing this version of Hannibal, the perpetrator of many crimes, is more surreal than visiting the 1980s. He feels he is falling from a great height, and there is no ground rushing towards him, only the walls of a bottomless pit shooting passed to give a sense of terminal velocity. They separate and Hannibal's consolidated mask lowers enough to show a raw seam of emotion.

"I have missed you," he murmurs, bringing Will's hand up to his lips to plant a kiss on his knuckles, before the mask slides back into place. "For now though, we mustn't linger in Florence. Jack has already found me once, and Mason knows I'm here."

"God, I never want to hear that name again."

A smirk of agreement passes across Hannibal's features, and he tugs Will's hand. "Come, there are other places to show you."

Twenty minutes later, Will begins to laugh. At Hannibal's inquiring glance, "I've been up and down the tracks three times in the last few days, and this is my first time seeing the actual train station."

“Days, by your reckoning,” Hannibal adds dryly, though his face is composed with some humour.

Will leans in and pinches the skin of Hannibal’s waist through his shirt. Hannibal jerks in surprise, batting his hand away, and Will laughs more loudly. He knows Hannibal has a more playful side, and he’s determined to bring it back to the fore. The older man blinks at him reprovingly, but Will is sure there’s a stirring of mischief in his eyes.

The train station sits beyond a ring of main roads, squat, modern and beige, and Will begins to tense as they cross the road and enter through one of its glass doors. “Don’t you think the train stations might be staked out?”

Hannibal pauses to look at the departure boards, eyes darting across times and places. “Hopefully. And if not, there will be security cameras.” Will raises an eyebrow at him, but he doesn’t extrapolate. Instead, he palms Will a billfold of money and turns him by the shoulders to face the ticket booths, before leaning in to speak by his ear. “I trust you still have your knife on you?”

The heat of Hannibal’s body is very distracting. His words dimly register, and Will hopes he isn’t expected to mug somebody. “Uh, yes.”

“Good, Mason’s men shouldn’t approach us in the open, but I can’t be sure. Now, go get us two tickets to Milan, for the train at a quarter past, and meet me by platform sixteen, I’m going to pick up something from luggage storage.”

“Are you sure it’s smart to separate?”

“I have no cause to be sure about anything from here on in,” Hannibal chuckles, voice a low reverberation that sends a surge of electric heat through Will. “And I’m loathe to part with you, even for a moment. But we may only have a few minutes while our enemies gather themselves.”

They’re hardly inconspicuous; two grown men, standing too close to each other to be anything but lovers or conspirators, with evidence of violence bruised across their faces. Will nods and forces himself to step away from the intoxicating shelter of Hannibal’s body at his back.

He looks behind him when he joins the queue. Hannibal is already lost from sight, and Will and tries to suppress the ball of anxiety roiling in his guts. What if he gets to the platform and waits and waits and waits and Hannibal never shows, already taken?

No, these are useless thoughts. They’re going to have to be able to leave each other’s sights once in a while. He drums his fist in agitation against one thigh.

He garbles his way gracelessly through buying the tickets, the ticket operator serving him with pinched lips. Will’s best attempts at awkward social misfit don’t garner much sympathy, perhaps he’s less convincing now that he no longer believes it himself.

Number sixteen is the last in the row of platforms, although there seems to be access to some later additions beyond the end of this one. He waits a little way back from the gate and its guard, eyes scanning the crowds at the station. *Is that pair watching him?* With his free hand he continues to tap a staccato tempo against his leg. *Where is Hannibal?* He will personally go and find Mason and stab him in the eyeballs if – after all of this – that bratty little animated corpse tries to…

"I see you've done your best to crumple our tickets."

Will spins to find Hannibal, his coat gone and a large backpack clipped across his grey sweater. The relief is immediate and overwhelming, and he channels it into glaring at him with mutinous fury, before straightening out the tickets and slapping one of them into Hannibal's proffered hand. The amusement on Hannibal's face only increases, and he places a hand on Will's back to guide him to the platform gates.

The guard checks their tickets and asks a question that Will can't decipher, although from his scrutiny of their faces he can make a pretty good guess as to the general content of the query.

Hannibal speaks his Italian in a slightly different accent, too fast for Will to follow, although he catches the words 'Fiorentina' and 'Manchester United'. This new persona gets quite animated and mimes some boxing moves, and the guard warms to their plight. A queue is building up behind them and their new ally waves them on through.

"What was all that about?"

"I told him we were defending the honour of the city's football team against visiting hooligans from England. Entirely justifiable violence."

They walk nearly to the end of the train, where the platform narrows into a corridor with a sign '*Ai binary 17 & 18'*.

"Quickly now, we've picked up a tail." Hannibal unclips the strap across his chest and ducks into the penultimate carriage.

He empties the backpack onto an vacant seat: out fall two leather jackets, two motorcycle helmets, and a laptop satchel. Will sheds his jacket like it's on fire and pulls on the jacket Hannibal isn't already sliding into. Will's coat and the large empty backpack are pushed into the overhead luggage compartment.

Hannibal casually disorders his hair and walks the length of the carriage. Will follows him into the next train car, and with little time to think of anything else do with his own wild curls, he spits into his free hand and tries to slick them back. The padded biker jackets change their profiles, and at a glance two different men step down off the train.

The whistle blows, the last train door slams, and the train grinds into motion as they enter the narrow brick walkway leading towards platforms seventeen and eighteen. The corridor carries on towards signs for bus stops and a car park, and Will fights the urge to look behind them.

They exit through a set of automatic gates, the guard on the other side paying them no mind, and walk down a walled ramp towards the car park. When they emerge, there is an open area below a high fortress wall, divided with bus lanes, zebra crossings and parking spaces. Occupying the latter are cars, scooters, and one fatally beautiful motorcycle.

Leaning against the gleaming death trap, arms folded and mouth set in an unwavering line, is Chiyoh.

Hannibal takes it in stride, only the shadow of a hesitation betraying his surprise. “Chiyoh, how lovely to see you. Please forgive the abruptness of my manner, but we have trouble nipping at our heels. Are you here to help or hinder?”

“I followed you from the Uffizi. I could have stopped you there.” Her eyes travel from Hannibal to Will, “You took my lesson to heart.”

Will cocks his head. Lesson? *There are means of influence other than violence*…the kiss. He wants to laugh, reins in the impulse, but humour colours his voice. “Being pushed off the train certainly led to an instructive experience.”

She squints at him suspiciously, aware that she’s missing a joke, but her eyes return to Hannibal.

“I kept your prisoner alive, until the choice was taken from me. Now it is done, and I must know; did you eat Mischa?”

So the seeds of doubt Will planted did put up shoots. He feels a curl of savage satisfaction at that, even as another part of him winces at having undermined Hannibal. Switching his attention to Hannibal and watching closely, he sees all lingering traces of mirth leave his face, sadness and forbearance rising up over his features like mist in its place.

“Yes. But I did not kill her.”

Chiyoh breathes a small sigh and appears to relax. She reaches into her coat to pull out and pass him a cell phone. “If you need me.” Her eyes lower, and for a moment she reminds Will of a small child confessing a dire transgression, “Or, if I need you.”

The phone disappears into Hannibal’s jacket, “Thank you Chiyoh.” He waits for her eyes to return to his. “We will see each other again.” He lets the assurance settle for a moment, then pulls out leather gloves from another pocket, and a set of keys.

She responds with a curt nod, business like again. “You should go.”

To emphasise her point, footsteps echo from the walls housing the ramp to the station. “Gloves and helmet Will,” Hannibal orders as he straddles the black Suzuki.

“If they’re for you, I’ll slow them down.” Chiyoh promises.

“Be careful,” Will tells her, before jamming on the helmet and clicking the chinstrap in place. She gives him a faintly surprised look and an enigmatic nod.

Will climbs on behind Hannibal, tensing as the engine catches and the vibrations amp up, wrapping his arms around his waist. As soon as he's settled, the bike roars off, and, after an initial wave of terror, the adrenaline kicks in. A zealous grin dawns beneath the darkened visor of his helmet.

Time travel. Sleeping with the enemy. Hannibal on a motorbike. Will wonders never cease?

Will is fairly certain they are speeding. Hardly the best way to stay below the radar, but then, given some of the other bikers who pass them, maybe driving below the speed limit would draw more attention.

They reach Siena in a little under an hour. An hour of holding onto Hannibal's body, the bike growling beneath them. An hour of watching green fields, trees, and vineyards flash by under blue sky, the high velocity air stripping the heat from the sun. He's been awake for over twenty four hours, but the adrenaline holds his exhaustion at bay. Nothing is required of him except to lean into the corners, take in the view, and squeeze Hannibal tighter when they accelerate. It's a level of responsibility he could get used to.

Despite the new ache setting up in his bones, Will discovers a mote of disappointment when the bike pulls to a stop in front of a gate in the Tuscan countryside outside the city. Gloved fingers tap on his knee, and Will reluctantly relinquishes his hold on Hannibal, who climbs off and unlocks the chain, dragging the heavy metal gate open. He returns to the idling bike and drives them up a track that curves up and around a hill.

The coy shoulder of the rise lowers to reveal a beautiful two-story villa, pale yellow where the walls peer through the vines. On the paved terrace out front, two men sit playing cards and smoking cigarettes under the shade of a parasol.

One of them is already leaping to his feet and running into the house, the other sweeps the cards into a pack and extinguishes his cigarette before trotting to the edge of the patio. Hannibal pulls to a stop and cuts the engine.

"Pronti ora," the stranger announces.

"Molto benne." Hannibal kicks out the sidestand and lifts off his helmet.

Will watches and listens, feeling as though he's still a spectator in the past; this is his future but very much Hannibal's present. They dismount as the second man reappears from the house, carrying identical helmets, jackets, and satchel. He's wearing trousers that look very like Will's, as his friend is wearing navy slacks that resembles Hannibal's. They quickly don their uncontaminated armour, and climb onto the vacated Suzuki.

"Grazie Alessandro, Francisco."

“Grazie a te, dottore.”

“Chiudere a chiave il cancello.”

“Certamente.”

As the two men drive off, it’s easy for Will to project the parts of himself he no longer wishes for upon the passenger riding pillion, easy to imagine ‘the old Will’ is riding away and leaving this part of him here, to do as he likes. Not the man he should be, the man he actually is. It is freeing.

Will lifts off his helmet and sucks in a lungful of air. The air tastes of warm, sun-baked earth, floral notes on the late afternoon breeze. The survivor in him asks, “How do you know we can trust them?”

Peeling off his gloves, Hannibal's eyes are traveling Will's face again, appearing to marvel at what they find. “I’m paying their parents’ medical bills, and putting their children through college, respectively.”

“Mason’s money could cover that and more.”

“I know who their parents and children are.” The simple statement should send a chill down Will’s spine. It doesn’t. “And they get a free holiday.”

Will raises an eyebrow. “Where are they going?”

“Ancona, to catch a ferry to Albania, then north into Montenegro. They’ll be stopped somewhere along the way, but there’s nothing to tie them to us.”

“How long have they been waiting here, like this?”

“They’ve been on alert since I saw you in Palermo.”

“You *were* there.” Will had vacillated between absolute certainty and cloying self-doubt.

In the slanting rays of the sun, Hannibal’s eyes are burnt ochre, shot through with carmine, and a desolate wind howls from the black cavernous pupils. “It took everything I had not to speak to you in the catacombs.”

Reaching out to take his hand, Will sighs with a jagged puncture of sorrow. “You’ve waited for so long.”

Hannibal opens his mouth to reply, then thinks better of it. He smiles, and tries again, “Come, let me show you around.”

The house is cool and open, spacious and Spartan. The little furniture that deigns to occupy the space is pretending to be rustic, but is too expensive and well made to carry it off convincingly.

“How long do we stay here?”

“They will expect us to run far away. We will lay low for a while, a month or two, then we may go wherever you like.”

Will wants to say something sappy, something like *I don’t care where we go as long as I’m with you*, but it seems too trite, as though it would cheapen the dark and thorny paths that led them here. He swallows and looks away, eyes landing on the potted herbs that line the windowsill above the sink.

It occurs to him which room they’ve paused in, and he thinks of the last time he was in a kitchen with this Hannibal. His fingers lift to cover the nervous twist of his lips, rubbing them to disguise the tell.

Not fooled for an instant, Hannibal steps in, guides him back against the counter and removes his hand, using his own mouth to cover the anxious tic, to sooth it away with warmth and silent assurance. His wide hands slide down his shoulders and back, mapping his physicality, his corporeal presence.

Body humming under Hannibal’s touch, mouth gently invaded by his dextrous tongue, Will’s anxiety melts away, transforms into liquid desire. Hannibal tastes of longing and a patient endurance, whittled back to its last shard. He kisses with the controlled desperation of one who wants to crush what they love, to consume and preserve. He drinks Will in with the restraint of a parched man who must sip his water or risk purging it.

He’s held himself back for so long, and he’s holding back even now. Will doesn’t want him to have to wait any longer.

The bedroom in the eaves of the house is shuttered and dark, daylight spying through small gaps in the shutters. They move against each other, skin against skin, in a slow fever; they’re both burning with the same affliction, infected with each other, and finally able to ride it out. This time it’s Will who submits, who embraces Hannibal and receives him into his body. In turn, Hannibal anoints him with oil and worships his flesh, tasting and kissing every stretch of his skin, reacquainting himself with every scar and bony protuberance, every sensitive span of tissue that shudders under the ticklish pass of Hannibal’s fingertips.

Never before has Will been touched like this, and combined with the electric bone deep thrill that Hannibal locates inside him - presses into again and again – his body is surging with new sensation, riots breaking out and spreading ecstatic carnage through his system. He rakes his nails in the skin of Hannibal’s back, clinging to him while spinning away, untethered. He absently worries he might dissolve in Hannibal’s arms, soak into the sheets and drip between the floorboards, utterly undone.

He does spill, he does shake apart at the seams, but he is still held, still gripped, and still, more than ever before, whole.

As the tide recedes, they share a silence warmed by the exchange of their breaths, and the delicious friction of eye contact. Hannibal runs his fingers through Will’s hair, eyes shining with the kind of joy that can only be borne from sorrow. The shutters behind his eyes are

open, and Will can see all the way into him again; even now, it's a harrowing sight. Will can see, beneath his happiness, that he wants to say something. Doesn't want to say something.

Catching the insight in Will's expression, Hannibal folds his lips, sighs, and slowly withdraws. Will sits up as Hannibal climbs from the bed and crosses the room, throat tightening on a whimper, trapping it before it can expose the soft core inside him. The walls of his forts are losing integrity, destabilised, there are holes letting the light leak in.

Hannibal throws open the doors to the balcony. Beyond, the sun is lower, and the sky is a subtle gradation from pale cyan blue to the yellow-pink blush of peaches. He pauses for a moment and returns to the bed. Will could collapse boneless with relief, but reaches toward Hannibal instead, who crawls over and forcibly lies him down, wrapping around him like a limpet. Will sags into his embrace, head tucked under his chin, a steady and slightly elevated heartbeat audible where his ear is flattened against Hannibal's collarbone.

"Tell me," Will eventually instructs. "I've never seen you uncertain before. It's weird."

This garners a quiet huff of laughter from Will's new exoskeleton. "I don't know if it is something you will wish to hear."

"That's never stopped you before." It was meant as a quip, but the dispassion with which Hannibal hums in response informs Will that the 'before' is the issue here. He rubs whichever part of Hannibal is currently beneath his fingertips. "It's okay, Hannibal. You've had to do so much of it alone, we can talk about it."

Despite the reassurance, Hannibal takes another moment to review his thoughts. "I tried to find a way to spare you some of it. I hid Abigail; I thought you could hate me for that, and beyond this threshold I could bring her back into our life." He pauses, and Will hears him lick his lips. "I knew you would betray me, but not in the way that you did. When I realised you had lied to me about Freddie Lounds, that your entire transformation was a farce, I knew there was no other way. It was as you had said. I needed to take everything from you."

Regardless of the heat radiating from Hannibal's proximity, the skin on Will's face begins to feel tight and cold, like the blood may have fled the conclusion blossoming in his brain. "It's all my fault."

Hannibal's arms squeeze him tighter. "No, Will. You might as well blame yourself for gravity, or time, or chance. We can't know how it might have gone differently, if I hadn't known what you were to me."

"I could have told you less, or more. Maybe that would have changed things."

"I don't think that's how time works, *mylimasis*. However it works as a physical structure, whatever allowed you to step between the decades, it didn't disrupt the continuum. Time marches on, irrespective of your position in it."

Will shivers as he thinks on this. He tells Hannibal of the diverging path on his way into and out of Florence, and the single path on his return to this year. Musing on this, Hannibal tucks his chin up so he can press his lips to the crown of Will's hair. Speaking into his curls,

low and quiet, “Perhaps the other path would have come straight to Florence, with you still uncertain if you wished to join me or destroy me.”

“Doesn’t that break the causality you were just speaking of?”

“Yes and no.” Hannibal exhales, one hand beginning to massage the tension from the back of Will's neck. “You never did choose that other path, you came to me. You always came to me.”

You always came to me. And Hannibal knew the whole time. “The whole time, the whole time we knew each other, you…” He trails off. He knows it, it doesn’t need to be said.

Hannibal shifts his head and lifts Will’s chin, meets his eyes and says it anyway, “I loved you. The whole time. I always have.”

The last remnants of his fortifications wash away, and, finally, loosed from the prison that kept it safe, the dark iridescent bird of his own emotion rises. The beat of its wings echoes through his chest. Will stretches up to bring his face closer to Hannibal’s, and gives the bird a voice.

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Aw, what a soppy ending. I couldn’t help it. I love these guys. >ᴗ<

There you mes amies, **le Fin**. Feel free to hit me up for any chat, any questions you may have about my take on time travel, or anything else. Thanks again for the support! <3

Edit:
You're welcome to put any interpretation you like on the story, that's the beauty of subjectivity and 'death of the author' etc. But...
if you want it, here's my explanation about the time travel:

So, I should explain, the boys haven't actually correctly understood the time-travel situation (why would they?), the truth is:

If Will had taken the 'right' path, it would have led to the canon we know so well, where they're reunited but Will still wants to stick Hannibal with a knife. But by taking the left path, he ended up in the past and got to know younger Hannibal etc. Either way, Hannibal would have ended up obsessed with Will, either because he's just that damn intriguing, or because he met him in the past. I've done it this way, because the only way time-travel could possibly work, is if everything that comes after is consistent with the original time-line, otherwise, (as briefly touched on in Ch3) you remove the condition that led you to traveling in time, negating the effects of having done so, and you end up with a paradox or time-loop (unless you believe an alternate time-line splits off, but that's less consistent with our current understanding of physics). So the only thing this story really changes is i) Hannibal's thought processes when distorting Will's life, and ii) everything that comes after they reunite in front of the Primavera... So, no trying to eat Will's brain!
That path was no longer available when he retraced his steps, because he couldn't go forward to a future where he hadn't met Hannibal in the past.

But the boys wouldn't know any of that, so Hannibal and Will are just making their best guesses.

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